THEODORA'S HUSBAND

LOUISE MACK

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BY

LOUISE MACK

AUTHOR OF

"THE RED ROSE OF A SUMMER," "AN AUSTRALIAN GIRL IN LONDON,"
"CHILDREN OF THE SUN," "TEENS," "GIRLS TOGETHER,"
"THE WORLD IS ROUND," ETC.

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TO

K. McI.

WHO HAS TAUGHT ME ACROSS SEAS AND
YEARS THE MEANING OF FRIENDSHIP

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THEODORA'S HUSBAND

CHAPTER I

"HOME comforts, bright and cheerful society of unexceptionable tone, hot and cold water, whist-drive every Thursday, beautiful sea-views, excellent French cooking; moderate terms during the season, and special low terms during the winter; *en pension* from five francs a day inclusive."

Thus ran the alluring advertisement that filled Pension Ducré up to the garrets and down to the basements all through the summer season at Boulogne.

It was not Mme. White's fault that Pension Ducré was mostly recruited from elderly spinsters and abnormally dull families, and she could no more be made responsible for the characteristics of her "gentlemen guests" than for the cook's unexpected moods or the chambermaid's absent-mindednesses. Those things were as inevitable a part of a pension as were the odours of dinners that lurked about the *salle à manger*. Certainly there was the Princess —*née* Golsky—and her beautiful young daughter, Theodora. They counted for a good deal. As Mme. White said whenever she got a chance, "The Princess has known better days!"

Poor Princess! If it was true she had known better days, she had also known better meals! To-day the lunch was specially bad. The grilled mackerel was red on the bones. The "haricots verts" were

unsalted and under-cooked. The potatoes would not go round.

"Is rhubarb a fruit or a vegetable?" demanded a spinster, whose long neck was adorned with beads and exotic shells.

The very ancient gentleman at one end of the table looked at her anxiously, then turned to his wife, the lady with the lace-curtain frock.

"What does she say, dear? She always talks in a whisper."

"She is wondering if rhubarb is a fruit or a vegetable," shouted his wife in an ear-trumpet.

"Oh, I see, I see." He paused a second. Everybody listened politely. "Why! it is a fruit, of course, as we eat it as a sweet," said he, as if that were an irrefutable proof.

Three ladies seemed disappointed, and ready to argue. But he was too deaf.

There were only two men at Pension Ducré, the deaf colonel and Mr. Lee Gage, an Army tutor—now out of work—who sat next to the Princess's beautiful daughter at meals and tried to make himself pleasant to her. He was bald, made bad puns and what Theodora described as "colonel noises," coughing intermittently in a stentorian fashion, as though he were a retired Anglo-Indian.

At the far end of the table the other ladies had exhausted an interesting theme offered to them by the shrieking-voiced spinster. They had no more to say on the subject. They had talked about it a good deal without coming to any understanding.

Neither the Princess nor Theodora followed that placid flock into the drawing-room. The former went straight to her room, the terrible little five-franc room, with the furniture that creaked if you looked at it, the deal washstand with the basin that always seemed to her like a bitter joke, it was so small and chipped, the everlasting French prints on the wall representative of Victor Hugo's funeral, the

Eiffel Tower, Rouget de l'Isle singing the Marseillaise. There she would smoke her after-lunch Russian cigarette, her only real pleasure in the day.

Theodora disappeared down the steps and out of the garden gate.

It was now half-past one. Boulogne lay fast asleep in the drowsy stillness of the summer midday, and the great blue, lazy fields of the sea, glittering and smooth as glass, were stretched out northwards in a dreamless, waveless slumber.

Through the fierce glare of the July sunlight Theodora dashed along like one in a dream. She was deaf to the low thunder of the tramway-cars that rolled past her down the hilly street as she made her way upwards through the sleeping French township towards the Ramparts. She was unconscious of the heat.

With the terrible concentration of youth her whole being was possessed at that moment with just one idea. Nothing else existed in the world for her but the fact that she had decided to marry Sir George, and was now on her way to tell him so.

Right in the middle of to-day's lunch she had leapt, with a wildfire impulse of the brain, to this decision. For weeks she had been turning the matter over and over in her mind. Sir George had millions. He belonged to a good family. He was nice looking. He was eminently respectable, yet highly respected. He was madly in love with her. Her mother liked him. To marry him would instantly change their existence in sordid pensions at five francs a day to a glittering life, where every luxury imaginable would be lavished upon mother and daughter alike, for Sir George had promised that Theodora should never be separated from the Princess except by her own wish. But against all those prepossessing "fors" were too formidable "againsts." And one was that she did not love Sir George in the very least.

For three months she had hesitated, vacillated,

veered, and kept the infatuated Sir George—and the Princess too—in a state of most painful suspense.

And then to-day, quite suddenly, she had looked round the table of Pension Ducré, and an awful panic had seized her. Suppose it should be her destiny, and poor, dear mamma's also, never to escape from scenes like these, but to pass all the rest of their lives among these dreadful people? Suppose that day after day, month after month, year after year, they were to go on living in cheap Continental pensions on their pitiful little income of £180 a year—until poor mamma grew into a deplorable-looking person in remnants, and she, Theodora, was an old maid like the one at the table, with a shell necklace and a shrieking voice?

Suppose their lives were to be henceforth and for ever made up of dirty tablecloths, scarcities of towels, difficulties about baths, afternoon tea made over a spirit-lamp in a back bedroom, and the sort of conversation they had listened to to-day?

Suppose the one way of escape was suddenly closed? Suppose Sir George changed his mind, and no longer wanted to marry her and shower luxuries on her? At that point lunch had come to an end, and, seizing her parasol from the hall-stand, she had escaped from the house like one possessed.

"Theodora!" a voice exclaimed suddenly.

"Oh! Sir George."

"Is it you?"

"Is it *you?*"

"Where are you going?"

"To the Ramparts."

"To meet me?"

"Yes—of course."

"I wasn't sure, you know. I asked you to come, but you never replied."

"I know. But—but I was coming."

They stood facing each other in the middle of the Rue Melherbe.

"I——" began Theodora, impulsively.

She looked down, then up, then down again.

"Yes?" said Sir George, eagerly.

"I——"

"You what?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Tell me."

"No, I can't. It's nothing."

She whisked round suddenly and moved on towards the Ramparts, and Sir George fell into step at her side. She had begun to blush. It was intolerable. But he, infatuated as only a man of forty can be over the mystery of a girl of nineteen, would have liked nothing better than to stand still for ever and watch that tide of palest pink rising in her lovely face.

"My cheeks feel quite red, it is so hot."

"You have hurried."

"I thought I was late."

A clock struck a quarter to two. She was early by a quarter of an hour. The pink deepened.

"This is the hottest time of the day."

She swung the scarlet parasol down between them to hide her face.

"Yes, it's intolerable of me to name such an hour. But I can't talk to you alone at your pension. And —and—I'm leaving this afternoon."

"Leaving!"

She started. She stood dead still for a moment. Everything went slipping away from her. And so her strange intuition was right after all! He had come to tell her he was leaving. That sharp and horrible vision of the lunch-table had had its root in deadly actuality. He had changed his mind.

"Yes? You are going to Paris?" She was moving on now. "Excuse me—my foot hurt—or to London?"

"Paris," said Sir George. "What's the matter with the foot?"

"A tight shoe."

She laughed gaily. Her eyes sparkled. Her cheeks were exquisitely tinted.

In the same tone she added, "So you have come to say good-bye?"

She was quite mistress of herself now. It was not for nothing that she was the daughter of Irma Golsky. But behind—just behind—those smiling eyes of heavenly violet was the blackest abyss a young soul ever looked into. Twice—not once in her brief lifetime, but twice—men had told her they loved her above everything in the world, and then had come like this to bid her good-bye, and put her out of their lives. She was nineteen, and it had happened twice!

The terror of it was so great that she dared not stop smiling for one little moment. Still less dared she think, or the indignity would send her hot Slav blood to her brain and change her into the wild elemental creature that she knew herself to be under all her airs of high-breeding and repose.

"But Paris will be dull now, *n'est-ce pas?*" she said lightly. "August is no kinder to Paris than to London."

"I don't care. I have some big things to see about—airships and things."

And then once again during that walk to the Ramparts she stopped suddenly and stood dead still. But this time she was quite off guard. Her eyes looked into Sir George's. He was astounded. They were full of a strange, almost terrified surprise. Something had wrecked her courage and torn off the mask.

"*Airships!*"

He caught her by the arm.

"For Heaven's sake, what is it, Theodora? Are you fainting?"

"No, no. It's nothing."

"Lean against me."

"It's only the heat."

He put his arm round her to steady her.

She tried to draw herself away. But he held her firmly. She could not help herself. She was obliged to stay there a minute within the circle of that strong arm. Her head was against his shoulder.

"What do you know of airships?" asked Sir George.

He put the question without the slightest intention of doing so. He had no idea why he should ask that. He was utterly unconscious that he was being carried straight on to the word by a telepathic wave beating from Theodora's brain to his own.

"Nothing. *C'est drole, n'est-ce pas?*" she replied.

She drew herself forcibly away and leaned against the old brown wall, and now outside the hold of those arms she realised that a strange feeling of being immensely protected had passed away from her. Even in dear mamma's arms she had never experienced that sense of absolute safety, for was not poor dear mamma's heart always distracted with bills and money worries? And those other arms—they had thrilled her. But they had never protected her. Instead they had always filled her with the wildest unrest.

What was happening to her throat? And her head? Both seemed about to burst. She dug her nails into her little soft, pink palms till the blood came. But in vain. The scene just passed had mastered her. She heard her breath catch suddenly in a strange wild sound that filled her with shame. Then a sob burst forth—a loud, fierce sob such as a terrified child might give. She dropped her head on her arms and leaned low on the wall.

Sir George was distracted.

"Theodora, Theodora! What is it? Listen, listen. George loves you. Can't you trust him? There's something the matter. Can't you tell me what it is? You're scaring the very life out of me, Theodora, by crying like that."

No answer. Nothing but choked sobs.

"I simply can't go, dearest, while you cry and are

in trouble. Oh, if you were my wife and I could take care of you! I wish to Heaven it were so."

He leaned on the wall and bent his head down till he brought it on a level with hers. All he could see of her were those wonderful rippling clouds of rosy gold-brown hair under her white hat.

"Speak to me," he pleaded.

"Are you really going away?" she muttered at last.

Sir George started.

"Heaven knows I don't want to," he answered.

What could she mean by that question?

"I am only going so that you shall not be bothered. I want to stay. I want never to leave you."

He waited.

"Surely you know that, Theodora?"

"Is it true?" came from under the hat.

"True?"

Was he dreaming? Was it beautiful, mocking, tormenting Theodora who was asking in a stifled voice if it was true that he wanted to stay where she was?

"Don't you know it's true? Doesn't every one that knows me know it's true? Haven't I shown ridiculously plainly that I'm your slave, Theodora—an old fool of forty enslaved by a girl of nineteen?"

Her reply seemed to him the most extraordinary thing he had heard in his life.

"I'm crying because you were going away," she said.

The sentries paced lazily to and fro, wondering what these foolish English were doing here at this hour of day.

A companionless wasp went buzzing and humming mournfully through the fragrant air. The breath of white roses came to them more and more poignantly from the gardens below. The vast panorama of city and shining sea wore the look of profound indifference

that nature is given to assuming in the face of human emotions.

"You care, then, if I go?" asked Sir George at last, stumbling about among the strange wild things he desired to give voice to, and choosing this commonplace little question out of a sheer instinct for self-preservation.

No reply came. Theodora remained in that same dejected, childish position, but the sobbing had ceased.

"Theodora, listen." He put his hand on her arm. "You must look up, you must let me see your face. You must tell me——"

"What shall I tell you?"

With a swift, lithe movement she raised her head, and then her whole tall, slender body, and sprang to her full height before him.

"What shall I tell you?" she repeated.

She looked up, and her tear-stained face broke out suddenly into a dazzling smile. The wonderful beauty that was destined to make her famous in all Europe heralded itself. The radiant sweetness of a child, coquetry, pride, diablerie and a haunting sadness were mixed in that smile, to the utter undoing of any man so smiled upon.

Sir George instantly lost his head.

"You beauty!" he breathed. "I believe I would kill any man who took you from me."

"No one wants to," she murmured. With her head on his breast for a second in the inevitable moment that followed her smile, she whispered low, "Take care of me. . . . I will marry you when you like . . . that's what I came to-day to tell you."

CHAPTER II

As Theodora entered the pension that afternoon the odour of methylated spirits and the dim, dispirited clink of china in various bedrooms betrayed the fact that the guests at Pension Ducré were preparing their own afternoon teas. She paused a moment in the hall. The methylated spirits seemed to rise at her like mournful ghosts, telling sad stories of faded pasts, and an image of mamma flashed across her—mamma boiling her little kettle with her own white hands over the spirit-lamp in her awful bedroom and meagrely measuring out a spoonful of tea, and carefully looking over the biscuits to see if there would be enough for to-morrow too.

"Thank Heaven, it's all over now!" she said to herself. There was a mirror in the hall, and she caught sight of her face. She paused a moment and looked dreamily at herself, taking her hat off as she did so.

"Am I really beautiful? If so, why should I not have love, happiness and wealth all together? Why not?"

Her spirits rose at the possibility. Heavy masses of hair of the warmest red-gold were rippling all round the classic little head that was set so proudly on a long white neck. The great purply blue eyes with their heavy black lashes and fine black eyebrows were liquid and enticing as a siren's. Her pure Greek profile was cold and haughty; but the peculiarly expressive mouth, with vivid scarlet lips, contradicted that coldness. A tall and slender figure

that moved with the lightness and grace of a cloud before a gentle wind, little hands and feet, two rows of perfect teeth, and a voice with a honey sweetness in its tones—such was Theodora at nineteen, as she stood there carefully inspecting herself in the mirror of the hat-stand at Pension Ducré.

"There's a gentleman in the drawing-room waiting to see you."

The English parlourmaid had suddenly appeared in the hall.

"For me?"

Theodora stared in surprise.

"He has been here five minutes. He said he'd wait."

Theodora moved towards the drawing-room.

On the threshold, a premonition of something eventful that was going to happen on the other side of the door seized her; she put her hand to her heart, the colour ebbed from her face; her hands trembled a little, then she turned the handle of the door and went in.

"Theodora!"

Some one rose from a sofa across the room. He was young, not more than twenty-five, with black hair and a pale face, and a pair of extraordinary blazing eyes of mixed green and yellow, that shot forth rapier-like glances as though to rip open to the very bottom everything he looked at. And the thin compressed lips had an iron firmness that was all too seldom to be found with a brainy brow like his. He was dressed in a light fawn tweed suit, and his big, foreign-looking felt hat was tossed impatiently on the floor. With two strides he had reached her and caught her in his arms, before she could utter a word or defend herself in any way.

"Theodora, Theodora!"

"You!"

"It's I—Marcel. I've come to you."

"Marcel!"

She put up her hands and pressed him wildly back.

"Yes, Marcel! Don't you remember him?" he said, half vexed, half laughing.

His dark, powerful face was bent down over her fair one with an expression of eager tenderness.

"You!"

"I have frightened you!"

"To-day!"

She was still pressing him from her.

A wild, baffled look was creeping over the excited expression of her eyes.

"Don't push me away," he said sharply.

"I must. Let me go. Why have you come? You said farewell to me a year ago. You remember, Marcel, that day in the Pineto, at Viareggio. Your decision was that our love was hopeless. You told me you were too poor to marry. You had to give yourself body and soul to your work and ambition. You could not think of a wife. You said all that, Marcel."

He laughed joyously.

"I know. But who could have dreamed of what was going to happen?"

"What has happened?"

"I was poor, struggling, and unknown a year ago, and I knew I might be like that for twenty years—for ever, perhaps. And to-day I'm rich, and successful, and on my way to being famous. That's what has happened."

She gazed at him in a paralysed silence.

"It was all luck, the most extraordinary, inconceivable luck that ever fell to a human being. A year ago, just after I saw you last. I was travelling in a train from Genoa to Paris, and at Asti there was a breakdown, and we were stuck up there for several hours. While I was standing about on the lines, examining the engine, an Englishman strolled up and began to do the same thing, and presently we exchanged a word or two, and mutually cursed at the

delay, and after a time he made a remark to me that seemed suddenly to open up a whole world of congenial ideas between us. He said, 'I believe that the only way we are intended to travel over long distances is through the air, and I hope it will come in my day.' After that we talked, we talked, we talked. Then we travelled on together all day and half the night to Paris. He was an Englishman, that man, and very rich. And generous, *mon Dieu!* He threw himself heart and soul into my ideas which I confided to him with absolute trust, for I saw he was a man one could believe in to the death. I showed him my plans. Then he gave me money, all the money I needed and more, much more. He wanted me to have a fair trial, he said, for he believed in me, and some engineer friends of his to whom he introduced me expressed the same opinion. Last week I gave a private trial near Paris of my aeroplane, and it was a success, Theodora. Experts and dilettanti and all were amazed. You see," his eyes fairly burned with that strange white fire from the brain behind, "I'd got something in my head that no one else had. All I wanted was money, financial assistance. And now three millionaires have made a syndicate of themselves to protect and develop my invention, and the French Government is interested, and I'm no longer the unknown and penniless Marcel, with wild schemes, whom you knew at Viareggio. Do you mean to say you haven't read of me in the papers?" he interrupted himself naïvely.

"No."

Theodora's voice sounded thin and birdlike after the rich stream of all that electric vitalised speech.

"Theodora! Whatever have you done to yourself?" he burst forth. "Do you know that you're lovelier than ever? You are more beautiful than I dreamed; you are a great, great beauty, Theodora, though you don't know it yet. Theo, Theo, be nice to me. What's the matter?"

"I can't!"

"What is the matter? You have changed?"

"No."

"Don't draw away from me."

"Yes."

"Aren't you glad? Don't you understand that it's all come right?"

"I am engaged to another man," she said quietly.

Next moment, finding him regarding her with an expression in which amazement and an incapacity to comprehend were swiftly being overswept by hot anger and an undisguised and very real pain, she cried out, as if to excuse herself, "It only happened to-day."

But as she spoke a vision of the Ramparts rose before her. She saw George's steady eyes. She heard his kind, quiet voice, stirred with pity, saying, "George loves you. Can't you trust him?" She remembered how he had looked when she smiled that time. Somehow, never intending to in the least, she had caused him to believe that she really cared for him. How else, when he thought for a moment, was he to interpret all those little things—the way she had blushed when they met, the way she had stopped dead when he told her he was going away, and manufactured a story about a foot hurting, the way she had given that awful sob, the way she had wept and had answered him, "I am crying because you are going away," and then, finally, the way she lay back in his arms after she had said she would marry him, just to taste again that unique and wonderful sense of immense protection that had come over her when he had held her a few minutes before? And she had promised him that to-night she would tell mamma, and to-morrow morning he could come.

"But if it had been months ago it would make no difference," she ended aloud, with sharp defiance in her young voice.

He had watched her in silence.

"You don't love him," he now said scornfully.

"Yes," breathed Theodora.

"You must break it off—at once."

"Impossible. I cannot."

Her heart was pleading feverishly for George. He was like a boy of twenty to-day, bubbling over with happiness. He believed in her. Marcel came close to her again and stood beside her. His arm was touching her. But the assurance of tenderness and peace that George's whole personality had succeeded in instilling into her to-day defied the emotions that Marcell's presence was arousing.

"I will not break it off," she repeated firmly.

"You must. It's I for whom you care; you know you do," he said excitedly. He seized her hands. She shivered, but her resolve remained firm.

"Who is he? Tell me his name."

"Sir George Allingham."

She said it timidly, as if the very utterance of the name might introduce Sir George himself into the midst of this drama being played out between Marcel and herself in the red-velvet drawing-room of Pension Ducré, with the dim chink of china far away in the distance, and the faint odours of methylated spirits in the air.

"Sir George Allingham."

Her hands were dropped as though they had been burning coals. Marcel had jumped back and was looking at her with the most extraordinary expression in his eyes. Then, before she had time to form any opinion whatever about his thought, he said quietly—

"Of course, that is an admirable match. I have heard of him. He is a man any girl might be proud to marry."

He turned round and looked about for his hat. His sallow face was almost livid in its pallor. By his quick breathing Theodora knew he was deeply disturbed. She watched him stoop and pick up his hat. "George, George," she kept saying to herself.

But in vain. The words suddenly changed to "Marcel," and when she realised he was about to take his leave she rushed to him, drooped against his arm, and whispered: "Oh, it's too hard; I can't marry him—it's you I care for, always you."

"Don't, Theodora."

It was his turn now to push her away.

"But I *can't*," she repeated wildly.

"You must. You will," he answered stubbornly.

Some profound change had taken place in him.

"And I must go," he added.

"Go! Do you mean for ever?"

"Yes."

He took her hand in his to say good-bye, but he was smitten with her nearness, her exquisite eyes, her bewildering, cold, Greek profile, combined with the tremble on the scarlet lips, the grace of her bending head, with its clouds of red-gold hair, and he said, as if beside himself—

"I will go now, but I will come back. There is something I must decide, and I cannot decide while I am here. And to-morrow I will come and tell you what my decision is. I am at the Hôtel de l'Univers."

"But what does it all mean? What decision? What is it you are talking about? Do you mean, you—you don't love me?"

"Yes, I love you, Theodora. It isn't that. But, of course, I didn't know you were engaged when I came. I must decide now whether I can do such a thing as let you break your promise to another man. To-morrow, then," and he was gone, with an air of tearing himself away while he was able.

In a dream Theodora wrote a note to Sir George. In a dream she told him she was not ill, only tired. She could not talk it over with mamma to-day. Would he be so very, very kind as not to come and see her till the day after to-morrow?

CHAPTER III

THAT night she slept not at all. Her brain was on fire. She tossed from side to side, tormented by her thoughts, which, it must be confessed, touched very little upon Sir George.

At what hour would Marcel come? What would he say?

She confined herself to these questions, going over them a hundred times and the mystery that lay behind them, and every time she found a different answer. About half-past six, feeling the uselessness of staying in bed, she got up and began to dress. Just as she had finished Josephine, the little French chambermaid, came in with her *café-au-lait.*

"*Tiens!* Mademoiselle is already up. She is early this morning. Has mademoiselle slept well? Ah, but her eyes are a little tired."

"Quite well, thank you, Josephine, but the morning is too fine to stay indoors."

She would like to have gone out at once, and let the sun console her, away from the hated surroundings of Pension Ducré, but she dared not leave the house for a minute.

Lunch-time came. No messenger had yet arrived to announce, "A gentleman in the drawing-room for you." Everybody was already at table when she entered the room. She had to sit next to the old colonel, who was feeling particularly cheerful that day.

Being fully convinced that England "was going to the dogs," he took a genial satisfaction in pointing out the symptoms which in his opinion indicated the imminence of that ambiguous catastrophe.

Poor Theodora had to endure this as best she could. It was torture. She felt that everybody was looking at her. As soon as possible she murmured some excuse and left the room. Up in her bedroom she paced up and down, bitterly reproaching herself for her lack of self-control. She must learn to face trouble like other people. But it was little use arguing with herself to-day. She was completely unstrung. She flung herself on the bed and lay there motionless for more than an hour, going over and over again the same thought: "What time will he come?"

At last, without any reason, she made up her mind that he would come about half-past three. Two hours of waiting. She bethought herself of the piano in the drawing-room, and went downstairs.

She understood and loved the tender, mournful music of her great compatriot Chopin above all other music. She found in it all the romantic melancholy of her native temperament. To hear it hammered out by some English or German Philistine in a drawing-room would set her teeth on edge. Yet this afternoon she played the B flat Minor Sonata as badly as any one, and she knew it. She could not concentrate her mind on the music, so it passed her by, leaving her dissatisfied and uncomforted.

And so the afternoon dragged wearily on. Half-past three. A quarter to four. Still no sign of Marcel.

At four o'clock her mother came in.

"I had lunch with our solicitor, Mr. Fisher," she said, throwing herself wearily into an armchair. "He is here for a few days, you know."

Her voice trembled a little.

"Yes, mamma. Was he nice?"

"He gives me very disquieting news about our investments. I don't know how we shall ever get through this year."

"Really!"

Theodora remained quite unmoved. Money troubles were absolutely insignificant just then. She was sorry, though, for her mother, and promised to make tea.

Directly tea was finished she returned to her room. What could she do now? To play the piano again would remind her of the dreadful afternoon she had just passed. To read was even more impossible. She sat miserably by the window and thought of all the reasons, possible or impossible, that might have prevented Marcel from coming. And so the day went by.

Dinner-time! Yet he might still come. She was dizzy with anxiety and lack of sleep. She told her mother that she had a bad headache and could not eat any dinner. The Princess kissed her and asked no questions. To herself she said, "She is making up her mind about George." Once more Theodora was left sitting alone by the window.

Suddenly she felt she could bear it no longer. Something must be done. If Marcel Fleur would not come to her, she would go to Marcel Fleur. She jumped up excitedly and began to put on her hat. Her eyes gleamed and her cheeks burned as she slipped quietly down the stairs. If only Josephine did not come out at the critical moment!

She stepped into the street and closed the door quietly behind her.

CHAPTER IV

It was growing dark, and the lamps were being lit, as she entered the hall of Hôtel de l'Univers. The hall-porter, with that mixture of obsequiousness and superciliousness beloved of his tribe, strolled forward to proffer his valuable services.

"Could you tell me, please, if M. Fleur is in the hotel?"

"I do not know, mademoiselle. He is leaving to-night. But I have not seen him go out. If mademoiselle will wait one little moment I will send to inquire."

"No, I will go myself—the number of his room, please?"

"Ah, very well. Will madame kindly step into the lift? Jean, show the lady to No. 41."

The lift stopped at the third floor, and Jean, proud of the beauty of his charge, offered eagerly to conduct her to the door, which was right at the end of the passage, but Theodora energetically declined his proffered services. She felt dazed and half-petrified with excitement. She must be alone. The door of No. 41 stood slightly ajar. She knocked —lightly at first, then harder, but there was no answer. She could hear her heart throb as she stood there, listening intently.

"Perhaps he is asleep or absorbed in his work."

But that mistrust of her reason and confidence in her senses, which is innate in every human being, impelled her to open the door. She must see with her own eyes. Otherwise she could not believe in her failure to find him.

Almost unconsciously she entered the room. One glance told her it was empty. Some clothes and a few books were heaped up on the bed, ready for packing. A half-packed portmanteau stood open in the middle of the floor. He was going away then, going without even saying good-bye. She suffered the pain of it unconsciously, as a person numbed by an anæsthetic. For a few moments she stood there just inside the door, a sad little smile on her face, almost happy because she was among his things. Then she forced herself to wake up and realise that she must go.

A lady emerged from the next room just as Theodora closed the door of No. 41 behind her. She went on down the passage, and a cynical smile played around her handsome lips. She purposely delayed ringing up the liftman, so that they two might be taken down together, and in the brilliant light of the lift she was able to examine her beautiful companion critically. Theodora's violet eyes were lustrous now with sleeplessness and excitement, and her cheeks were flushed. The lady gazed at her in evident admiration; but Theodora turned her head away. She was angry at the notice taken of her at that moment, when all that she wanted was oblivion.

"Did you see the gentleman?" asked the hall-porter, who was out on the steps speeding off a passenger. "He was in the office just now paying his bill."

But Theodora fled past him, thinking only of the comfort of the darkness. She reached home safely, and slipped in unnoticed. They were at dessert now. Nobody knew she had been out.

But just as she had thrown herself at full length on the bed, confronted with the terror of the night before her, Josephine entered with a letter.

"Theodora, I am going away. I am not coming to say good-bye even, just going straight away from

you, I suppose, for ever. Theodora, don't hate me. Don't say all kinds of horrible things about me to yourself. I don't want to go, but it is that I must go, Theodora, because if I stayed I should come and see you, and if I saw you I could not go, I could not give you up, I should carry you away and marry you, and then I should never be really happy, at any rate not for a long time—not for years, very likely. Theodora, forget me. Listen, Theodora. You will marry Sir George, and he will worship you, and of course you will be far, far happier than if you had married a mad vagabond person like me, whose very profession itself is in the clouds, or near them, and who would be an uncomfortable, selfish, impossible husband for a beautiful woman who is half a child still, and needs to be looked after a good deal and taken care of. Theodora, you will be happy. You will make Sir George happy. I am going. I will pass away, and you'll forget me. You'll forget everything. It was inevitable, I suppose, that we should have fallen in love with each other away over there, in that strange winter when you and I were the only young things, and saw each other every day on the sands or in the Pineto, where the mountains used to show themselves in blue and purple patches through the pines. Theodora, that was when I kissed you. But even that I am going to forget; I am going to look on you now as the wife of another man, and Viareggio shall be a page that is more than turned down—it is torn out altogether and destroyed. Theodora, good-bye. Be happy, and make him happy. I've got my work—I shall be all right. You didn't know that I was coming. You couldn't help engaging yourself to him. Don't think for a moment, Theodora, that I blame you. When you get this I shall be gone.—MARCEL."

Holding the letter in her hand, she went on reading it with a dual sensation in her brain. The handwriting was his. And, just because it was his

and she had not seen it for so long, it overwhelmed her with a sharp delight to have it there in her own hand like that. But mixed with that emotion was the anger and the anguish that the things he was saying gave her.

The egoism of it passed her by. She was nineteen, and, of course, she was an immense egoist herself, and so she had not the slightest idea of what egoism was. Her own left her no time to think of any one else's. She saw nothing egoistic even in such phrases as, "And then I should never be really happy, at any rate not for a long time," or "It was inevitable that we should have fallen in love with each other," or "That was when I kissed you, but even that I'm going to forget," or even "I've got my work, I shall be all right," and "Don't think for a moment that I blame you!"

All she saw was the one supreme fact: Marcel was gone. He had given her up to another without an effort to keep her.

He had given her up, though she had declared her willingness to break off her engagement with Sir George and make herself free for him.

He had given her up, though she had offered—even pleaded—to let everything go.

He had given her up, though she had cried to him that it was he whom she loved, though she had dropped into his arms and suffered that moment of unutterable shame when she had deliberately gone against Sir George and her sense of honour.

She stood, tall and white, in the middle of her bedroom, with the letter in her hands. All was over. There was nothing left. He was really gone, and as long as she lived she would see him no more.

One pale candle near her made a little golden point of light in the dimness and shadow of her room. All outside the little golden circlet was shadow, vagueness; and further back was utter darkness; and standing about in that darkness were her bed, her

armchair, her washstand, her wardrobe, all hypnotised into a state of weird stillness that was almost deathly in its immovability and silence.

She felt her mind reeling, and she tried to focus it upon those homely objects that would preserve her balance by their very homeliness and simplicity.

She sighed.

"Oh!—dreadful—terrible!" she heard her voice whisper strangely.

The sound of it aroused her, and a passionate longing to be avenged on this man who had made her suffer so drowned every other emotion. She was almost overwhelmed, and the Slav in her was confronted with a red, misty vision of a knife.

She left the room rapidly, and went across the passage with its bare white boards to her mother's bedroom.

"Mamma!"

Her voice was wild and broken.

But there was no answer, and looking round she found that the room was empty.

As she came out later into the narrow corridor again she heard her mother's voice coming from somewhere further along the passage, in one of the rooms where a gleam of candle-light shone from an open door.

That was the Colonel and Mrs. Keery-Crawford's room, and Mrs. Keery-Crawford's voice came floating across to Theodora also.

"And this is a photograph of the Colonel at the head of his regiment," she was saying.

Her voice was loud and penetrating, made so by long and constant practice with the Colonel.

"This is his sword!" she went on.

"What a beautiful sword!" The Princess's soft, clear voice had a note of divine sympathy and admiration.

The listener in the passage trembled.

Her heart was weighted down beyond all endurance

with her own misery, but yet some chord within her seemed to vibrate and thrill and fill her with a different kind of pain as that little conversation came floating out to her.

The Colonel at the head of a regiment! That deaf, tedious old bore, in carpet slippers with cats' heads on them, who filled her always with such impatience, leading his men into action! The Colonel with a sword! Was it possible he had been some one in his day? Had he veritably lived and fought and been out in the very thick of life's fray, this old man whose sword hung now in the bedroom of Pension Ducré, at five francs a day, with a whist-drive every Thursday?

"I said the old Anglo-Indians were snobs," she said, pitifully to herself, with a lump in her throat. "Why not? Why shouldn't they be? What else is there left to them? What is there left to any one?"

She swayed; she was faint. She gathered herself together and crept down the stairs.

The night was breathless; she must have air. The front door stood wide open, and a long path of blue electric light shot out over the dusty laurels and little lawn in the black garden beyond. Some one was coming up that path now. He stepped into the blue light, and she saw as in a dream that it was Sir George.

"You?"

"Yes, I, Theodora," he said, in a voice that was not to be recognised as his. "I couldn't stand it any longer."

"Oh! I am so glad."

She swayed forward and almost fell into his arms.

"If you hadn't come I should have died," she cried.

"Why, in Heaven's name, did you send me away, then?"

"I don't know."

The utter incoherence of it was stupefying. Any

man must have been mystified. But Sir George made his own interpretation.

In her very incoherence and inconsequence, coupled with the helpless way she was clinging to him now, he read the final touching surrender of a high-spirited, wilful young girl's heart to love.

The drawing-room door opened, and the Colonel came strolling out to smoke his evening cigar.

But he smoked no cigar in the garden that night.

With the softest touch in the world he presently moved the hall door forward till a shadow fell delicately athwart that glaring bright blue-lit patch of garden in which the Princess's beautiful daughter stood so conspicuously clasped in the arms of a tall, fair Englishman, who held her to his heart as though Pension Ducré and all its guests were a thousand leagues away.

How could he remember anything or any one—that tall, fair Englishman? Theodora was whispering to him, "Let us be married soon, and take me away, far, far away from this."

CHAPTER V

A FEW minutes' walk from the Church of St. Germain l'Auxerrois,—an eighteenth-century structure, which, like St. Paul's in London, carries one back near to the beginning of our epoch,—stands one of those old houses remaining still to tell of a Paris that existed before the days of the Terror.

As the town residence of an old but impoverished family that had held lands in Normandy since the time of Rolf the Ganger, the hotel had never been much used during the generations succeeding the Grand Siècle, and a few weeks in the spring and early summer had been all that the Seigneurs de Memlis had been accustomed to spend in Paris since the last of the unteachable elder Bourbons had lost his throne. Of course, it was necessary to show the aristocratic inhabitants of the Faubourg St. Germain that the lords of Memlis were not yet extinct; but the expense of even a short season in Paris had now become too great for the slender resources of a simple country gentleman, and the present head of the family, Guy, Baron de Memlis, having for many years spent his time and energies in directing the affairs of his ancestral acres—quite content with the modest luxury which they afforded him—had at length yielded to the entreaties, and even tears, of his daughters, who saw in the tempting offer of the syndicate the opportunity of occasional release from the dull and straitened circumstances of the ancient château. Finally, after many consultations and much misgiving of mind, De Memlis consented to accept

an offer for this town hotel, and received a sum of money which, carefully invested, promised the son and heir the opportunity to deport himself among his fellows as befitted his rank and lineage, and made the ladies of the family free to visit at Paris or Trouville or wherever they desired.

This was where Marcel Fleur, whose name was burning now in the mouths of all Paris, was established.

It was early morning. Seven o'clock had just sounded from the deep-toned bell of Notre Dame —reminding one of the ancient patroness, St. Geneviève, who erstwhile ever watched o'er the needs of her beloved Paris—and Marcel Fleur was already hard at work in his laboratory.

As one considered this slight, athletic figure, dominated by a head which indicated ingenuity and alertness in every feature, one recognised that here, at least, was the possibility of a remarkable inventor.

The great salon of the old house, acquired with such caution and secrecy by the syndicate for their purposes, was now fitted up as a laboratory, and no expense had been spared to provide a fitting equipment and opportunity for such experiments and calculations as could be carried out within four walls.

Strangely in contrast to the rococo ornamentation, which the architects of the age of the great Louis had thought to be the *ne plus ultra* of decorative art, were the various prints, plans, and diagrams which, without any idea of harmony or æsthetic notion, covered the walls, obscured the tapestries, and hid the forms of nymphs and shepherdesses which most of a former generation had neither observed nor appreciated, though they are very much run after nowadays.

It was evident at a glance that a student of aeronautics was at work in this great room.

Prints and models recording attempts at the subjugation of the air were to be seen on every side.

Marcel had studied more than the modern and purely utilitarian side of the subject. There were

old prints, showing the Icarus-like blunders of early aeronauts; diagrams of Leonardo da Vinci's and other medieval flying-machines; prints of the early balloons and parachutes.

In addition to these prints and cartoons, which were placed on the highest level of the walls, there was a systematic arrangement of engravings of the various machines which have been constructed since the time of Borelli for the navigation of the skies.

Here one could see both prints and models of the navigable balloon of Dupuy de Lôme, constructed during the siege of Paris. Professor Langley, of the United States, the ubiquitous and versatile Sir Hiram Maxim, the unconquerable Santos Dumont, Count Zeppelin, the darling of the German Army, the sphinx-like Wright brothers—all were represented.

One thing that might have struck the thoughtful observer was that there was too much machinery. Great inventive minds do not require these complex mechanisms. What simple means did Charles Darwin employ? and Lord Rayleigh?

But these were thoughts far from the mind of Marcel Fleur, as we see him at this early hour, carefully studying a diagram on his blackboard, from which he passed to consult his books and make calculations. He opened portfolios and consulted other designs, but all seemed unsatisfactory.

"I don't see how it can work," he exclaimed at last, impatiently. "I believe the old fool Ivan has lost his wits. It's a case of much ado about nothing."

He sat down moodily, disinclined for further thought or exertion of any kind.

He had, he thought, looked at the subject from all points of view. But there was no light; all was dark—the problem seemed hopeless.

At that moment he was awakened—called back to life and hope. A knocking below, a short conversation at the conciergerie, followed by a quick step on the stairs, aroused him.

"Come in," shouted he in answer to a sharp knock at his door.

There entered a sunny-faced youth, whose light brown hair and fair moustache, well-cut tweed suit and brown boots indicated his nationality.

"Oh! Bostock, is that you?" cried Marcel, excitedly. "Have you brought those things from Birmingham?"

"Yes," said Bostock. "I came over early this morning, and thought I had better hurry along here first as you might perhaps like to see me before I went on to Neuilly."

"Yes, I should; but you haven't the whole lot with you?"

"Oh no, rather not. I have only that special idea of yours, which I thought you would like to see. The rest of the machinery is at the Gare du Nord."

"Well, come in. *Mon Dieu!* come in, and let me see! You people at Birmingham are so slow. I might have had the thing made ten times over at St. Etienne or Solingen."

Bostock, accustomed to Marcel's brusqueness, said nothing, but went downstairs to his fiacre, and soon reappeared, carrying with difficulty a brass-bound mahogany case, which he placed on the table.

"Is that the model?" said Marcel.

"Yes," said Bostock; "it has been made according to your design, but——"

"But what?"

"Well, I'm hanged if I can make out what you are going to do with it. I don't see how it can fit in anyhow."

"Well, it's a little experiment of my own," rejoined the other. "And, you see, I like paying for my little experiments. I dare say your people often have similar experiences, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"Oh, I don't know," said Bostock; "at any rate, this is quite a new thing to me. But the governor

has taken a lot of interest in it, and thought I had better bring it to you myself in case of accidents."

The instant Bostock had left the hotel—in fact, while his step was still sounding on the stairs—Marcel unlocked the mahogany case, opened it, and took out a beautifully finished piece of machinery in aluminium bronze.

"You beauty!" he exclaimed.

He placed it on the table, and then opened another case which stood in one corner of the great salon, and took from it another highly finished and delicate arrangement of wheels, cranks, and eccentrics, to which he proceeded to fit the piece of machinery that Bostock had brought.

Having done this to his satisfaction, he brought forward an electro motor and carefully connected it with the machine.

Turning on the current, he carefully watched the movement, keeping count of the recurrence of successive phases with his watch.

After five minutes he turned off the current.

There was a sort of white glow in his dark face, a wild sparkle in his eye, which indicated more than contentment.

He began to pace the room rapidly.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he exclaimed, "it is wonderful. Wonderful! That difficulty is solved. I must let the syndicate see this at once."

Another sharp rat-a-tat sounded at the door just then.

"Come in," he shouted.

He opened the door, and there on the threshold stood Sir George Allingham.

For a moment Marcel stared as if transfixed. His heart seemed to have stopped beating. His faculties almost deserted him.

Like a crushing blow from some unseen, unsuspected agent, came the full realisation of the fact that the tall, fair Englishman who stood smilingly before

him in all his pride of health, wealth and station, had just returned from his honeymoon, and was now the husband of Theodora—for life or death the husband of Theodora!

"We are just back—only got home a couple of days ago. My first call is to you, Marcel," said George.

Marcel was speechless.

They shook hands.

Their eyes met.

They looked hard at each other.

George, in high spirits and brimming over with the joy of life, thought to himself, "Why on earth doesn't the beggar say something—about my marriage—congratulations or something."

But Marcel, with the wild and fiery imagination of an inventor, had a sudden vision of Theodora's red-gold head resting against that Saxon shoulder, and all he could say was—

"Come and see what I have achieved."

"You must not work too hard," said George. "Look here, Marcel, I've come to bring you an invitation. You're to dine with us on Friday night. My wife wants to meet you."

"Impossible," said Marcel.

"Nonsense," said George.

"I cannot dine out."

"I insist."

"I have no time. I beg you——"

"My dear fellow, a man who's as busy as you are is the only man who has any time."

"I've no time for dinners."

"But may I point out to you, Marcel, that you must dine somewhere, and sometime."

"Oh! dining doesn't trouble me," said Marcel.

George was imperturbable.

"Well, may I come in and shut the door?" he said.

Marcel started.

"Pardon!" he muttered. "Won't you take this chair, and a cigarette?"

But all the while he was listening still to those words of George's that were being beaten out on the back of his brain.

"*My wife!*"

It was of Theodora George was speaking.

"And I gave her to him," said Marcel to himself.

He must do something to conquer his inclination to fly like a dog at the other man's throat.

So he added to himself—

"Maybe I shall take her away again."

He rose and began to pace the room.

This was a habit of his, and George watched him quietly, accustomed to his eccentricities.

Marcel sighed, ran his hands through his hair, glared in front of him, and came to a standstill.

"I must go out," he said.

This was scarcely polite. But George was still unmoved.

"The best thing for you," he said.

"Why the best thing?" said Marcel, testily.

"Air, fresh air—you need it. You've gone quite thin and haggard these last weeks. I suspect you've been burning the midnight oil too indefatigably."

"When I work, I work," said Marcel.

He had found his hat.

He looked at George. Even in his present mood he could scarcely walk out of the house and leave his patron, who had just come to call on him, there alone.

"I am going out," he repeated.

George rose to his feet.

"May I come with you?" he asked.

"If you like. I shall go to the station. I go to Melun."

They stepped out into the street.

Paris was gay to-day. She wore a morning look of happiness, and chrysanthemums and roses and violets decked her mood befittingly at the street corners.

George was more amused than anything else with Marcel's mood. He found no cause for annoyance in the brusqueness and bearishness of the younger man. He liked to feel the rough edge of people when it represented, as it often did, sincerity and depth of thought.

Marcel walked along in dead silence.

George essayed to break it after a time with a little talk about the subject which had brought them together originally.

"When we were in Venice," he began.

Marcel started, winced, and went on glowering in front of him.

"When we were in Venice," said Sir George, affably, "we saw those drawings of Leonardo da Vinci's. They are under a glass case in the Accademia. Extraordinary things they are. You can see, as you look at them, the kind of man who drew them—playing about, as it were, with his ideas. His pencil ran along with his curious dreams, scrawling them over the paper, almost as if they had walked over it themselves."

Marcel was silent.

He had heard only one word: "*We!*"

"There are all kinds of ideas of machinery and weird objects and wings, and things, and you can see the old chap's brain in them all. I showed them to my wife. She was greatly interested."

"What time is it?" burst in Marcel.

"Half-past eleven," said George.

"I must be off," said Marcel.

They came to a standstill.

George saw now that his companion was utterly unstrung.

"I say, old man, you really must take care of yourself, and not go knocking yourself to pieces in this way. Come now," said George, "tell the truth. You've been working half the night and all the day on end, haven't you?"

Marcel pulled himself together with a great effort.

It was overmastering him, the desire to let go and give way to the mad fire that was playing havoc with his brain.

"I am all right," he said dully.

"I hope so," said George.

And he added after a moment—

"Anyway, you know I am always here to turn to, if that is any use to you."

"Thanks."

"I shall be here now for the winter."

"Yes."

"We must see a lot of each other."

"Thanks."

"I mean outside the area of work."

"Thanks."

"If there is any outside."

"For me there is no outside."

"I suppose not."

"There is nothing but work that is worth while."

"Then the only thing to do is to let me inside the area," said George.

"The area belongs to you," said Marcel.

He laughed.

And in his laugh was so cynical a note that George attributed it to utterly overstrung nerves.

"Horton and Jabez Craigs are delighted at the way things are shaping," he said, referring to the syndicate.

But Marcel was in no mood to talk of business.

"I have got to go and buy something," he said vaguely.

"And then you are off to Melun."

"Yes."

"But about this dinner, old man," George said. "I should like your promise before we part."

"But I hate dinners," said Marcel, bluntly. "I can't eat a lot of different things at a time."

"You needn't," said George. "You shall eat

whatever you like. It's my dinner, and I promise you."

Suddenly a gay, clear, high-pitched voice interrupted them.

"Who's giving a dinner?"

The speaker was a certain Mrs. Packinthorp, well known in Paris, and the widow of an old friend of George.

She stood there, barring the way, looking the very embodiment of all that was Parisian and artificial and smart, and carefully, so carefully, thought out, even to the bunch of violets in the front of her black cloth Empire gown.

They both shook hands with her.

Marcel had met her several times, and had come across her at the hotel at Boulogne where he had gone to find Theodora.

"What dinner is it?" she repeated.

Light and inconsequent though her tone was, George grew uneasy immediately.

"Sir George and Lady Allingham are giving a dinner on Friday and they want me to go," said Marcel.

"And me too?" queried Mrs. Packinthorp. "How delightful! You did mean to ask me, didn't you?"

CHAPTER VI

WHILE George was calling on Marcel, Theodora was having an adventure.

She had sent away the carriage and set off at a brisk walk along the quiet, quaint old Rue Cristine, where chestnuts hang over the tall grey walls. She had been shopping all the morning, and was now on her way home.

It was delightful to be on foot again, and alone.

Whether George would approve or not, this was certainly just what her mood cried for, this walk in the wide, quiet, almost country-like street. The air was sharp but sunny. Scents of violets stole out alluringly from the high, yellowy-grey walls, and breathed, as flowers do, a note of freshness and eternal youth that was strangely and pathetically at variance with the old walls and the hidden houses beyond, set back in their formal gardens.

Life turned on Theodora at that moment a sudden glittering picture of itself.

It was so bright, so beautiful, that her lovely lips parted in a joyous smile, showing the gleam of the little white childlike teeth within.

"To think that I was ever afraid of marrying George," she mused.

A thought of Marcel tried to obtrude itself. But in vain. No, no. She was mistress of her thoughts now.

"*Verboten*" was written large and plain over that area of her memory.

With a wisdom beyond her years she had made herself a talisman against the thought of Marcel.

Whenever his name came, as it must come sometimes, into her mind, she drove it out without delay.

Her method was very simple. She said to herself, "George! Mamma!" and they came at once to the call. Marcel's image flew! She saw instead the Princess, looking lovelier than ever in her freedom from that cloud of worry; and George, with his happiness carefully put away under an Englishman's usual mask, yet showing all the same in a hundred little ways—signs that Theodora was already learning to decipher.

"Both are happy, and it is I who am the cause of their happiness," thought Theodora.

And by dwelling upon that she had kept her mind free, so far, from that hateful memory.

She floated along with her eyes looking far ahead, full of dreams, her beautiful lips parted a little, and so absorbed was she in her thoughts, which were mostly concerned with the coming of the Princess who was to arrive next week in Paris, that she was blind to the sudden clouding of the sky and the disappearance of the autumn sunlight.

All in a moment, without warning, heavy rain began to fall.

The skies opened. A fierce downpour descended upon Paris.

What rain!

Like knives it cut through the air in long, sharp stripes, beating and lashing the earth till the soil leapt up into the air to meet it. It treated Theodora without mercy. In a minute her mole-coloured velvet suit was sopping. She was wet almost to the skin.

The long, still street was deserted, not only by carriages of all kinds, but by men and women.

The silence that brooded over the place was as profound and mysterious as on Theodora's own wild, native plains.

She looked round her in dismay. All her bravery of furs and velvet was drenched already, and she was too lately a beggar maid not to feel a sharp pang at the thought of her ruined gown. Because of its "simplicity" it had cost what seemed to her a good-sized fortune only a few days ago.

"Whatever shall I do? This is absurd. I might be away in the heart of the country instead of ten minutes from the Arc de Triomphe."

The storm, defiant, arrogant, as though to show how little it cared for the peace and order of earth's great cities, rolled along overhead with a doubled fury.

Each moment added to the fierceness of the rain, and now long, sharp flashes of violet lightning broke across the drab skies, and the thunder that had been rolling up from the distance for a long time came crashing in great, mad detonations over poor Theodora's head.

She was terrified out of her life, more, be it said, like a true woman, at the noise of the harmless thunder than at the flash of the dangerous lightning.

She began to run.

The great chestnuts flecked down on her their last few belated leaves, heavy with rain. The thunder roared and groaned, and then pealed till the earth seemed shaken to its depths. On and on she ran, but never a soul appeared in sight. Not a cab was to be seen anywhere. The only sound was thunder, and the thin, cruel noises of the lashing rain on the earth.

Suddenly, still running wildly, Theodora saw a small side street cut across the unbrokenness of this interminable Rue Cristine.

A gate in the wall stood open.

The black figure of a man was standing there.

She fled towards him.

"Oh! please let me in for a moment out of this dreadful storm," she cried.

He stared at her and uttered a strange exclamation. Next moment he was kneeling at her feet.

"It is I, old Ivan—and you, my Princess's little one."

"Old Ivan!"

In the crashing of thunder and the loud splashing of the rain, she stared incredulous and amazed, and saw a face that recalled to her the old familiar associations of her girlhood.

Before her was old Ivan Ivolott, a former peasant on the Princess's estate in Poland.

CHAPTER VII

WHEN she recovered her breath, and regained her stunned senses a little, she found herself in an enormous room, surrounded on all sides by windows. Dragged along by Ivan, it seemed to her she had climbed innumerable stairs and swallowed enormous quantities of dust before she had arrived at the summit.

"Here we are now," exclaimed Ivan.

He was very excited; his eyes were shining, his hands trembling. With all his excitement, however, he retained sufficient mastery of himself to remember very carefully to bolt and bar the door, and to cast searching glances round the room in all directions as though to make absolutely sure that they were alone.

"And what are you doing here?" said Theodora, her amazement now overcoming her terror.

He made no reply. Instead, he seized a towel and began wiping the rain from her clothes, begging her to take off her hat, and offering, pathetically, to be allowed to remove her shoes.

"But no, Ivan," cried Theodora, demurring. "I cannot stay here. It is only until the storm gives over. I must not take my shoes off."

"Sit in this chair, then, and rest."

But she refused even that.

"In a few moments I must go," she said. "You see, Ivan, I am no longer the Princess's little one, Miss Theodora. I am married. I have taken me a husband."

"Married, you! The gods be praised."

"Married to an Englishman."

"And is he rich?"

"He is good and rich and everything that any one can want, and I am now 'milady'—and the Princess—mamma, is coming to Paris soon to stay near me, and sometimes with me," she went on, babbling these domestic details with the freedom of a Continental aristocrat to an old vassal.

She let her eyes survey the room again while Ivan digested the information she had just given him.

It was an extraordinary place for a peasant to be housed in. All kinds of machinery seemed to be lying about—unintelligible to Theodora—shining aluminium bronze things—wheels—what looked to her like little toy boats, and ships, and sails. All sorts of rough charcoal drawings were on the walls, some of them of immense size. One covered the whole side of the wall, and seemed to Theodora's fancy to represent nothing so much as a duck with its wings outstretched, flying in a state of terror before the wind.

In the midst of her amazed observations her eyes fell upon a newspaper open on the table before her. It was a Paris journal.

In the centre of the page was a large photograph.

A young man, dark, lean, with deep-set eyes, black hair, and a firm, thin mouth, was represented there.

And underneath was printed, "Monsieur Marcel Fleur, the Young Inventor." Down the side of the portrait was drawn a long blue streak from a coloured pencil.

Theodora leaned over, drew the paper towards her, and stared at it with all her eyes.

Ivan was watching her.

"Yes, yes, that is he, my saviour," he said, talking in the language of their own country.

"You *know* him?"

Her hand was trembling; it was the first time she had seen that face, except in memory, since the day he had held her in his arms in the drawing-room of Pension Ducré.

"He is the most wonderful man," burst forth Ivan. "Oh! wonderful, wonderful—genius, brain, will are inside that head."

He shook his head and was silent for a moment.

"And *will*," he repeated louder, as if to impress upon himself some idea that was necessary to be emphasised. "And without will a man can do nothing," he went on.

Outside the storm beat loudly still. The wind shook and rattled the windows; the rain lashed unceasingly at the panes; and overhead the thunder was still groaning and crashing, though now with less and less energy.

Was it a dream? thought Theodora—all this great dusty silent room away at the top of some building in the heart of Paris, with the storm beating in at the windows, with the picture of Marcel lying under her eyes, with the extraordinary, incomprehensible machinery about her, and old Ivan Ivolott, from the farm at Grindolstol, standing there in front of her.

"What are you doing here, Ivan?" she asked.

She must try somehow to break through the cloud of mystery enshrouding her.

"I am here for a long, long time," said Ivan, proudly. "I am working."

"Working!"

"I have ideas," said Ivan, putting his hand to his head. "I will tell them to you, my Princess's little one. You are the only one who shall know."

He sank on his knees at her feet, and began to pour out a wild stream of talk.

"Yes, it is true that I have ideas," he said. "I always had them. The Princess would remember, and your father, who is dead now, the Mr. Derrington

—he would remember that I always had ideas. But what good did my ideas do me? Nothing, nothing! Never any good. No good to a peasant like Ivan Ivolott—no good at all. But did I give them up? No, no, never. I still kept on, and I made my plans and drawings and my models and dummies. Clay was there when there was nothing else to use."

Was Ivan mad? Had she fallen into the clutches of a lunatic in the shape of this old, kindly-eyed peasant, for whom she had always had, as a child, a distinct feeling of friendliness and affection?

"What brought you to Paris?" she asked, trying to make some headway in this unintelligible talk.

"It was he—he brought me," cried Ivan.

His excitement increased doubly.

"He has done much—all—for me," he said. "He talked with me, encouraged me—it was he who brought me here. I was penniless; he gave me bread and money."

"Who is *he?*" asked Theodora.

Though she asked, she knew what the answer was going to be.

"Marcel Fleur, my saviour, my benefactor," replied Ivan.

"Marcel Fleur!"

"Ah! You have heard of him," said Ivan, quickly. "His name is in the mouth of the whole world, and I tell you, my Princess's little one, to whom I am telling all these secrets with such confidence, I tell you the whole world will be justified. We shall find out the supreme secret of the navigation of the air."

"*We!*"

"I help him," said Ivan.

"With his work?"

"Yes. He allows me to."

"How do you help him?"

He went off into another fit of vagueness and excitement.

"Oh, I help him in many ways," he said. "For

I know things in visions, my Princess's little one. When I sleep, machinery mixes itself with my dreams. I see this going into that, and that fitting into the other. That is how I help, finding out the mysteries of the machinery that baffle M. Fleur on certain points. And then we talk together, he and I; he questions me, and seems to drag my thoughts from me. Sometimes he strikes me, as if to force them from me more quickly."

"And he—where is he?—where do you see him?" queried Theodora, breathlessly, under the influence of Ivan's excitement.

"I see him here," said Ivan. "In this room. This is his house you are in now."

There was dead silence for a moment but for the rain on the window-panes and the echoes of the dying-away thunder, coming as from another world.

"His house!" said Theodora, faintly.

"It is a secret, though," whispered Ivan. He nodded his head warningly. "No one knows and no one must know—that is what M. Fleur says. My presence must be unsuspected, undreamt of by the world; that is why I am here in this room, at the top of the house, which is reached by the secret staircase I brought you up by to-day."

"A secret staircase?"

It seemed to Theodora there was nothing in the world for her to do but echo in bewildered tones the extraordinary assertions that Ivan was making to her.

"A secret to every one," he said confidentially. "To every one except M. Fleur and me. No living soul knows of the staircase or of my presence here except us two, my master and myself, and now you, my Princess's little one."

"Oh, Ivan! what have you done in bringing me here?" cried Theodora. "This is something I do not understand, but I feel quite sure that M. Fleur would be terribly upset if he knew that you had brought a stranger like myself into this secret."

Suddenly, to her dismay, Ivan burst into tears.

"But it is a secret!" he cried. "A secret. True, I have brought you here, but you were in the storm, you were terrified of the lightning and the thunder. What else could I do? You would never betray me?"

"If you ask it, of course not."

But the very sight of Ivan's tears and distress confirmed her in her suspicion that behind all this secrecy and mystery was something her girlish mind could not grapple with.

Ivan now seemed to realise what he had done. He had given away secrets which his master had severely impressed upon him were never to be revealed to any one.

He begged Theodora not to betray him. "If he knew that I had brought you here he would turn me out like a dog," he said in trembling tones.

"Do you mean to say that he is cruel to you?" said Theodora, aghast.

But although she asked she knew quite well the answer.

"Yes," whispered Ivan, "when he likes. Merciless and pitiless when his mood is crossed. Terrible when his will is opposed or his orders are not obeyed."

"Yes, yes."

The words escaped mechanically from Theodora's lips.

"He would even kill me, I believe, if he knew that I had talked to you like this."

"Why have you talked to me, then?" said Theodora, sadly.

"Because you are my Princess's little one," said Ivan, simply.

The rain had stopped now, the thunder died right away. On the thick dust of the window-panes mud was splashed in dark, discoloured patches, as though to point to the length of time that these garret windows had gone uncleaned.

"I must go," said Theodora, "the storm is over. My husband will be wondering what on earth has become of me."

As she spoke she cast another look round this strange, weird room—and one glance more at that dark, young pictured face on the sheet of newspaper.

"You will keep my secret," pleaded Ivan, pathetically, his old blue eyes still full of tears and his old white moustache limp and depressed, as if in sympathy with its owner's overwrought emotions.

"You may trust me," said Theodora. "And now, you, Ivan, never breathe my name to M. Fleur—give me your word as to that."

"You know him, then?" said Ivan.

"All the world knows of him," said Theodora, evasively.

CHAPTER VIII

THE night of the dinner had come.

"George! George! Look at me, George!" cried Theodora. "Am I nice? Will I do? Am I what you like?"

She came slowly into the room with that wonderful drooping, swan-like movement of hers that put to shame all the upright, tightly corseted figures with their command of grace and dignity.

"Who dared to say that beauty unadorned is adorned the most?" she cried gaily, seeing herself reflected from mirrors here, there, and everywhere about the salon.

"Some man who paid the bills," said George.

"George!"

She pouted; a cloud came over the glittering brilliancy of her face. Suddenly she stayed her progress towards the black-coated figure at the fireside.

"You have nothing but bills to pay," she said, with a sudden note that was very like shame in her voice.

"Theodora!"

George made a movement towards her.

"Dearest, what are you saying? What are you thinking of?"

He put one arm lightly round her, lifted her head with his other hand, and looked down into her face.

To his dismay he saw it was strangely clouded. All the joyousness and glitter of a moment ago had fled. She looked almost miserable.

He whispered to her, "Don't look like that. It makes me feel such a brute. What I said had no meaning whatever."

"But it's true," said Theodora. "I know. Sometimes, when I think of all the money you are spending on me and my frocks and pleasures, I think of people starving, of people who love each other and are separated because of their poverty, and cannot marry."

George shook her lightly.

"This is five minutes before your first dinner-party in Paris," he said. "If tears come into those eyes I'll never forgive myself as long as I live."

"I won't cry," said Theodora, softly. "But the truth is, I *do* think those thoughts. Yet I love pretty things. You like me to have them, don't you?" she added naïvely, looking up into his eyes.

"Why, that's what I live for," said George. "Listen! Do you know, I never met a woman less mercenary in every way than you. It was what first attracted me in your character—I saw you didn't care a hang for money or position—I know you never thought of *mine*. What made me say that ass of a thing just now about bills was simply this: I didn't know what I was saying. I was stunned by your beauty as you came into the salon, in all that silver and diamonds. That's the truth, Theodora."

"Stunned by your wife's beauty," said Theodora, with a little half-embarrassed laugh. "That's funny, isn't it?"

"Is it?" said George.

"Isn't it?" said Theodora.

They started apart as a footman entered.

Theodora was a vision of beauty that night. She wore a gown of white film with silver softly veiled so that it should not shine too brightly, and the effect was indescribably beautiful and radiant. Diamonds sparkled in her hair and corsage. The only colour about her was her wonderful hair, gleaming like

burnished gold, and dressed very high in an old-world fashion, which lent a strange piquancy to her dazzling young loveliness.

The Duke and Duchess of Ailes were the first to arrive, and scarcely were their greetings over when Marcel Fleur was announced.

Theodora greeted him calmly. Her hand lay in his. Her eyelashes were lifted, and her eyes looked into his. But instead of a pair of eyes, it seemed to her that she looked into a furnace, and her brain shrank in terror.

The great salon, lit by hundreds of candles, swam round. But George's voice broke through the mist. He was laughing and saying—

"At last you have met him, Theodora—the famous Monsieur Fleur."

He stood beside them, looking from one to the other.

"At last!" said Marcel, gravely.

"At last!" echoed Theodora.

She put great emphasis on the words, and the effort of doing so brought her completely to herself again.

"I have heard so much of you," said Marcel.

Theodora found herself filled with amazement. He had said that so naturally. She had never suspected him of being an actor.

Somehow, for a moment, she had almost expected him to break forth into some mad words, and perhaps to call her "Theodora" before every one.

"And I of you," she replied.

"You have just returned?" said Marcel.

"Four days ago," said Theodora.

"You like Paris?" asked Marcel.

"I love it," said Theodora. "And you?"

"I, too," said Marcel.

"I am very happy to be in Paris," went on Theodora.

Since she was speaking a part in a play, the best

thing she could do—the only thing—was to say her lines simply and clearly, and to give no sign that she knew she was on the stage acting.

"In Paris one meets every one," she went on; "all the world."

"All the world and Lady Allingham," said Marcel.

He bowed as he spoke.

More and more did this little conversation seem to Theodora to have nothing at all to do with real life. She was not Theodora, George's wife; she was just the leading lady saying to some one—the villain in the play, was it?—it could not be the hero!—

"All the world and Monsieur Marcel Fleur."

"Oh! but——" said Marcel, with a slight shrug.

"He is very important," said Theodora.

"Not at all," said Marcel.

"*Very* important," repeated Theodora. "You must not shrug him aside like that."

George had turned away, and was talking to the Duke and Duchess, and Theodora and Marcel seemed quite isolated. She had a feeling that there was no one else for hundreds of miles round them, and the space appeared, to her excited fancy, filled with dead silence.

"I hear you have been doing wonderful things," she said.

"Who told you of them?" said Marcel.

He asked the question with intention.

"My husband," she replied softly.

There was something about saying those words that acted on her like magic.

The great space round them broke up.

The silence ended.

This was George's house she was in. She was George's wife—Theodora Allingham.

She turned with a slight, unconscious movement, and brought herself and Marcel into the other group.

"Mrs. Packinthorp!"

The door swung open to admit a tall, black-haired woman, in a gorgeous frock of scarlet tulle, who came

gliding across the salon, with a face brimful of expectancy of the delightful welcome she was going to receive.

"Dear Lady Allingham, how sweet of you to let me come!"

She held Theodora's hand in both of hers.

Just behind them Marcel was standing, watching.

They were an extraordinary contrast, these two women. Both tall, graceful, willowy; one with coal-black hair and a strange white face, high cheek-bones, and great black eyes, full of worldliness and self-possession; the other, with her red-gold hair, a lovely creamy-white pallor, her entrancing eyes that had something of a faun's look in them—eyes that seemed as if they had never looked on anything but leaves and flowers and streamlets.

Mrs. Packinthorp was beaming on Theodora, and Theodora was taking it all a little shyly, as befitted a bride, but with a certain air of aplomb that would never desert her in social matters. She had the instinct for always looking and doing, and, above all, saying the right thing: it was in the blood. The Princess had brought it from long generations back, and Theodora's inheritance of it was one of her greatest charms, combined, as it was now, with the beautiful freshness of youth.

But her heart was full of fear. In one moment she had recognised this woman. Hers was an unforgettable type. They were all so near each other—Marcel, Theodora, and Mrs. Packinthorp—that she almost believed some strange current might begin to flow between all three, and show others the hidden links connecting them.

Mrs. Packinthorp was speaking to Marcel now.

Theodora turned to the lovely little Duchess, who was one of her oldest friends, and began to talk to her.

"Who is she?" asked the Duchess, looking at Mrs. Packinthorp.

"She's a Mrs. Packinthorp," said Theodora, vaguely. "George knew her husband."

The Duchess nodded wisely.

"Very reèch, very pretty, very facksinating," she said, in her pretty broken English.

She always spoke English on every possible occasion. She was one of the few who had the art of making the English language sound adorable and charming and musical beyond all its deserts when she spoke it.

"Very facksinating," she repeated. "Present us to each other, dear."

Some more people came in.

Dinner was announced.

Theodora and Marcel were not near each other, but for that very reason Marcel was afforded a better opportunity of gazing at her.

As dinner went on, her extraordinary, haunting beauty played more and more havoc with his senses. She was too beautiful, that Theodora. . . . To-night she was beautiful beyond all words, beyond all imagination.

As Marcel said to himself, looking at her, while he talked in his own peculiar brusque way to his dinner companion, the Comtesse de Mirabeau, "She is so exquisite that no one could possibly look at anything else while she is in the room."

It seemed to him he had never realised her beauty before, and yet he had always thought her lovely. In the Pineto, surrounded by the green softness of the pines, with their yellow-brown trunks, and the purple mountains showing between the tree spaces, he had been quite aware that she was an uncommonly pretty girl. And on the golden sands, with the blue, glittering Mediterranean stretching itself out in an inimitable background towards Sardinia, he had fully understood that the tall, violet-eyed maiden who walked beside him, breathing in the ozone of the sea, was out of the ordinary as far as looks went,

pretty beyond the common acceptance of such an epithet.

But to-night!

To-night Theodora was wonderful. She glittered and gleamed, it seemed to Marcel, from the top of her head to the sole of her tiny foot. First the diamonds in her hair, and then the red-gold hair itself, and then the white and silver gown, and the eyes of ardent violet, and the red, curved lips, and the little nose that Phidias himself might have carved, and the way that beautiful shining head was set on the long white neck and the drooping shoulders were all intoxicating to any one with a sense of form and line.

Naturally Marcel Fleur had both these qualifications for being intoxicated with Theodora. His brain was full of graceful, beautiful visions.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he muttered under his breath, "she is more than a lovely woman. She is an inspiration. She is a fantasy—yes, that is what she is, a fantasy, and I——"

He drank a little more Pommery—*sec, très sec*—but still it seemed as if his blood ran at a doubly lively metre.

"After dinner," muttered he to himself, while the Comtesse de Mirabeau chatted buoyantly to him of the things of the day—"after dinner I shall and will speak to her. I have something to say to her. She must listen."

And when dinner was over at last, and the men rejoined the ladies in the salon, he made his way straight to Theodora's side.

"I want to say something to you," he said.

In her violet eyes he saw something that looked like fear.

CHAPTER IX

"YOU remember the day I came to see you at Pension Ducré?"

Marcel threw himself down beside her on the Louis Quinze settee.

Everybody wanted to talk to her, and he realised it quite well in all this extraordinary confusion of his thoughts. But what did it matter? He wanted to talk to her; he was Marcel Fleur. He would and should talk to her.

After all, who else was there at that dinner but himself and Theodora?

"Pension Ducré!"

She had a great fan in her hands, a wonderful thing of dull gold and palest rose-pink and ivory. It had belonged to some dead Maharajah, but was too beautiful to die with its owner.

She waved it softly, with a rhythmical, alluring motion, and Marcel found himself setting the movement of the fan as an accompaniment to this Theodora of the red-gold hair and the glittering diamonds and white and silver.

"Of course I remember Pension Ducré," she said. "I should think so. The Colonel! Poor dear! A real colonel, you know. He led his regiment into tight places in days gone by, and, oh! the irony of it —at Pension Ducré he wore carpet slippers with cats' heads on them, and squabbled with Mme. White over the bill. And at night he smoked cigars in the garden, and was just as tame a cat as the pussies on his slippers."

She laughed gaily, a sweet, rippling laugh, full of spontaneous amusement, which annoyed Marcel extremely.

"I do not know him," he said. "I never met him, and never want to."

"Really!" said Theodora.

She fanned herself lightly.

"He was very nice in his way. And, after all, if you are in a pension at five francs a day—and whist-drives on Thursdays, and everything included——"

"What is everything?" said Marcel.

"I don't know."

"I mean, how would you define it?"

"I never define."

"But if you were forced to?"

He stopped lounging on the sofa, and sat up straight and looked her in the face.

"Forced to!"

The fan waved to and fro in gentle, undulating, rhythmical movements.

And then a delicate, silver voice said softly, "Do you know, I am afraid I have not the slightest idea of what the word 'forced' means?"

"Of course not," said Marcel. "Why should you?" . . . He looked at her. "Let me change 'forced,' then, to 'asked.' If you are asked to."

"If I were asked to?" said Theodora. "Asked to define everything?"

"Yes."

"To me 'everything' means—well—just what I have got."

She threw into the word "everything" an energy that, in spite of its ardour, had not the slightest suspicion of unnaturalness. Her glowing face was full of spontaneity and sincerity.

Under her breath she added, very faintly, "I have George."

Marcel looked at her.

"Oh yes, you have George."

In all his life nothing had ever irritated him so much as those three words of Theodora's, "I have George."

They went to his brain and set him beside himself for the moment. He put out his hand and laid it passionately on her wrist.

"Theodora!" he breathed.

Her face seemed full of exquisite pallor.

The soft little wrist trembled. But the violet eyes looked straight up into his.

"Monsieur Fleur, you must not call me Theodora!"

"Theodora! Theodora!" he said, "you are Theodora. *Mon Dieu!* And I let you go—I gave you to him. Do you guess why?"

"It was not difficult to guess."

She had moved her arm, and was fanning herself again with the great pink and gold and ivory Maharajah fan.

"I swear you don't guess."

"No, I don't guess, I know."

"What do you know?"

"Why it all happened."

She laughed softly, and the gold and rose and ivory fan made undulating, beautiful movements for a second.

"I could put it all in one word," she said.

"Ah! so could I," said Marcel, "one short word."

Theodora was still smiling softly, as though the whole conversation was intensely diverting.

"I want to ask you something," she interrupted calmly. "You knew Mrs. Packinthorp before this evening, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"Yes."

He wondered impatiently why on earth Mrs. Packinthorp should be suddenly introduced into a conversation that was rapidly becoming to him a matter of life and death.

"Have you known her long?

"I met her some months ago. She is a society journalist, you know, and she once came to interview me for one of her papers."

"Did you know her when you were at Boulogne this summer?"

"Yes. In fact, she happened to be staying in the very hotel I went to. I dined at her table the night I left. Why do you ask? What has she to do with this?"

"Nothing."

She had learned what she wanted to know. Mrs. Packinthorp knew Marcel and knew he was there, in the hotel. Supposing she should some day remember where she had seen Theodora! There was something in the thought that annoyed her, though she tried to brush it lightly on one side.

The way she put it to herself was that the unconventionality of her visit there would displease George extremely if by chance it ever came to his knowledge. That was all she thought. Nothing more disagreeable presented itself. Never for a moment did her thoughts confront or even vaguely opine what Mrs. Packinthorp might possibly say of her visit.

"Listen to me now, Theodora," said Marcel. "I must speak, I must tell you. That day I came to Pension Ducré—you remember—I came to ask you to be my wife, and you—what did you reply to me? You answered me that you were engaged to be married to another man. I asked you his name, and you told me. You told me it was Sir George Allingham, and then, you remember, all of a sudden I told you I must go, and when you tried to keep me I said no, no, I must go, and when you clung to me and pleaded with me and told me that you loved me—what did I say? I said, 'Give me a little time, I must think, I will tell you to-morrow.'"

"To-morrow," breathed Theodora.

The great pink and ivory fan was in her hand, but she had forgotten to wave it.

"I went away from you, and, before Heaven, Theodora, this is the truth, I had the most ghastly struggle that ever man went through. You represented to me all that was beautiful and desirable on earth. I had my work. I was filled with ambition. I had a feeling of certainty that I was going to succeed. But all that was as nothing to me when compared with you—the beautiful you—with the violet eyes and the lips that no man could ever forget who had once——"

Her black eyelashes made two curves of intensest blackness on the pallor of her cheeks.

"Once kissed you, Theodora," he murmured.

He could not go on for a moment. When he had gathered himself together again he muttered—

"*Mon Dieu!* How could I have done it—how could I have given you up?"

Theodora lifted her eyelashes and looked up at him.

"As you say, the answer is quite a short word," said she. "Five letters. That is not too long to be quite *short*, is it?"

"*Six* letters!" said Marcel.

"*Five* letters!" said Theodora.

"Tell me the five letters," said Marcel.

"M-o-n-e-y!" said Theodora.

"Good Heavens!" said Marcel.

"Tell me the six letters," said Theodora.

"H-o-n-o-u-r!" said Marcel.

"Honour!" Theodora repeated the word distinctly.

She fanned herself and smiled.

"Oh no! Monsieur Fleur. You are very clever. But honour had nothing whatever to do with this romantic story."

She looked into his face with a quiet self-possession which almost robbed him of his self-control.

Every one else was talking intimately to his or her companion.

Mrs. Packinthorp was flashing her velvet eyes at the sandy-haired duke with the dab of yellow beard on his bony chin.

George was discussing Longchamps with pretty Comtesse Mirabeau, the yellow-haired Parisian in a gold-coloured frock.

The beautiful little duchess was making merry with Sir Ivor Symes, an English judge and school friend of George's.

Josephine de la Rue was softly singing at the piano a ballad of Chaminade's which she had heard in London.

Every one was interested in some one else. The Allinghams' perfect dinner and inimitable wines flowed happily in their veins, and nobody saw anything especially strange in the young black-haired inventor sitting beside the beautiful Lady Allingham on the tiny Louis Quinze settee.

"That was a question that haunted me once for a very short time—nay, twice. I know the answers now. Once you gave me up for ambition. Once for money. The first time was in Viareggio, when you broke my heart into little bits by telling me that you must go away and work and make money and carve out a career instead of loitering there looking into my eyes. Those were your own words. Then, when you came again to Pension Ducré, and I told you, as I was in honour bound to do, that I was just an hour ago engaged to Sir George Allingham, but that I would give him up for you—what did you do?"

"I left you," said Marcel.

"Exactly—you left me. Left me to a horrible, haunting wretchedness and doubt and suspicion. I should not speak of it now only that it belongs to the past and is quite over, for I could not speak of it only that I am now so utterly contented and happy,

and have every single thing any woman could desire —wealth, love——"

"Wealth, love. Love in the second place, I observe," said Marcel.

"Really, you have no need of cynicism. It is utterly wasted on me; for I can say, with equal sincerity, love, wealth. Only that it seems to me unnecessary to put it like that, *n'est-ce pas?*"

The Maharajah's fan here made a few soft, rhythmical motions in the air.

"I do not believe it. Lies! lies! lies! You have come to live in Paris, and you think you can lie, and to me. But no, I know you too well. I vow and swear that you are not happy. I swear you do not love George Allingham. I swear before all the gods that you loved me that day you lay in my arms in the salon of Pension Ducré, and clung to me, and begged me not to leave . . . Oh! Theodora," he whispered, in a changed tone, without any anger or cynicism in it, but full of simplicity and humbleness, "I did not mean to speak, but now that I have seen you I have got to make you see why I acted as I did, so that you won't loathe me and despise me."

"But I know," said Theodora, quietly. "It was all revealed to me so very quickly. You gave me up because you cared more for Sir George Allingham's patronage and money than for the heart of the penniless Theodora Derrington."

"A lie!"

"The truth!"

"*Mon Dieu!* A lie, I say. The very last thing in the world I thought of at that moment was money."

But he read her incredulity in her face.

"Do you mean to say you don't believe me?"

"I merely say you are very clever."

"Then I will *force* you to believe me."

In spite of herself, though she looked at him with cold and unutterable scorn, a little doubt now began to intrude itself.

Till now her conviction had been so deep-rooted and tremendous that it had never once occurred to her that he might have had another motive in treating her as he had done.

And even as she flashed her satire at him, murmuring, "I merely say you are very clever," she was facing a sharp wonder. Could she possibly have misread him?

Honour and money were so frightfully close together in this situation that nothing could possibly disentangle them.

It was only a question of believing or not believing him.

She could never prove that his motive was money.

He could always maintain that it was honour.

But while she sat there in this haze of wonder and distress the proof was suddenly flashed into her mind as though it were a weapon from some unseen agent.

Like Porphyria's lover, "she found a thing to do."

"My husband, as you are aware, does not know that we knew each other before to-night," she said.

"I am aware of that."

"It is time he knew, then."

"What?"

Marcel looked at her with an expression of mingled amazement and alarm. Her bewildering eyes stared into his with a fierce intensity. Never in her life had she been more purely Slav than she was at this moment. One minute—two—three, ticked away. Theodora rose to her feet.

"I have made up my mind. I have been most ridiculously silly, but now I have decided. *I intend to tell George everything this very evening.*"

With the last words she left him and went sailing slowly straight across the salon to where Sir George was talking with the others.

For a moment Marcel remained in hypnotised

stillness, watching her progress across the great, glittering salon. Then he was on his feet, moving after her. He caught her up half-way across the room.

"Lady Allingham," he said, calling her by that name for the first time, "there is something else I want to say to you. Will you have the kindness to listen to me for a moment?"

She turned round instantly and stood still.

"What is it that you want to say?"

"I want to say"—his voice sank—"What on earth are you going to do?"

Theodora laughed. "I am going to tell George," she said.

"You must not."

"That is a matter for me to decide."

She was watching him critically.

"Are you serious?" asked Marcel.

"Perfectly serious," and she broke into that gay, wild little laugh of hers, that was one of the most distracting of her fascinations.

"I don't mean to say that I am going to tell him *now*, this very moment," she said. "Surely you don't suspect me of such *bêtise* as that! But by-and-by, when every one is gone and George and I are alone. Then I shall tell him all the story."

Into the young inventor's dark, sallow face came an expression of unmistakable fear, and his voice trembled with eagerness as he said to her—

"I beg, I implore you not to."

"Why?"

"Surely you can see why."

"I am very blind. I see no reason why; but I should be very glad if you would kindly tell me."

He stared at her in a distracted way.

"Don't you see," he burst forth, "Sir George would never forgive me. It is all very well for you. He will forgive you because he loves you. But is it likely that he will forgive me? He will hate me in spite of himself—no matter how he tries not to

—when he knows that you cared for me more than for him when you married him."

He made no attempt to disguise the nature of his emotion. He was too deeply in earnest for that. His long, nervous hands clenched and unclenched themselves agitatedly.

"I see. That is what you fear?"

Her eyes never left his a moment.

"And if he hates you, what then?"

"What then? Why"—he paused a moment.

"He would perhaps withdraw his help from you. Perhaps he would be spiteful and break up the syndicate or do something of that kind," said Theodora, reflectively. "That is what you mean, is it not?"

"Exactly. I should be ruined."

"And that is what you fear?"

They were standing facing each other in the middle of the salon, and neither noticed that some one was strolling slowly over in their direction.

"And that is what you fear?" repeated Theodora. "So you think I had better say nothing. Ah! Monsieur Fleur, Monsieur Fleur! *Are we still to speak of it as honour?*"

CHAPTER X

"WHAT on earth were you talking to Marcel about all that time this evening?" said George, and Theodora knew he had heard nothing.

"He is so brilliantly clever," she replied.

"I quite agree with you. But, dearest, you never said a word to the Duke, and he was a little disappointed."

"Oh, I've known him since I was a child," said Theodora. "Mamma has known his people for ever so long—and then he married my greatest friend, Carolina."

"She is a Florentine, is she not?"

"Yes, a Medici. We were at school together in Paris and have written to each other ever since. She was frightfully poor once. The Duke was frightfully rich, but she married him for love, all the same."

"For love, all the same."

George repeated her last words and laughed.

"There speaks my mercenary Theodora," he said, "who thinks it such an extraordinary thing that a woman should marry a rich man for love."

All the dinner guests had gone. George and she were sitting for a few moments on the identical sofa where she and Marcel had sat earlier in the evening.

"The Duc d'Ailes has taken a tremendous fancy to Marcel," said George.

"And the Duchess to Mrs. Pack!" cried Theodora. "She takes these infatuations sometimes, does Carolina, but only to people who are what she calls *molto elegante*. And she told me to-night that Mrs.

Pack was the most elegant woman she had seen in Paris. Certainly she did look awfully well to-night, didn't she? That scarlet tulle gown must have cost something. It had the most wonderful hand-embroidered panels in dull green and gold and black, sewn with real rubies. Is she very rich, George?"

"Rich? Mrs. Pack? Why, as far as I know, she hasn't got a penny. This is a secret, dearest. She gets these gowns lent her by great French dressmakers as advertisements. No doubt she got that frock to-night on the strength of coming here."

"Oh, how exciting! Supposing it had caught fire, or had a plate of soup spilled over it."

"It was probably insured."

"And that was why she made a point of saying to Carolina and me, 'This is the first frock I've had from Mayeux. I'm so pleased, and he's so reasonable!' Rich people always love to say things are reasonable, so Carolina and I were properly impressed, and Carolina has asked her to call."

"Heavens!" groaned George.

"I told her her husband was an old friend of yours."

"So he was—a friend of my father's, rather. But—well, to tell you the truth, dearest, I don't like Mrs. Pack. I don't approve of her. And there you have the whole story!"

"But that's no story at all," demurred Theodora.

"No. But it's a preface," said George.

"To what?" asked Theodora. "To the first chapter, or a book, or a serial story?"

"Well, I scarcely know how to put it. To my wishes, I suppose. The fact is, I don't want you to be very friendly with Mrs. Pack, Theodora. I don't want her to get into the way of coming here. That is all. I have nothing against her except that I don't like her tone, and I don't want my wife to have too much to do with her. It was silly of me not to tell you before; but—well, one often lets things go by

for a while, waiting for the best time for speaking of them."

Now was her chance to tell him about Marcel. He himself had given her an opening for her tale.

"Yes, I will tell him," she said to herself. "It is too silly to think that I have never told him before. I will just say straight out, George—*à propos* of things we let go by—I was once upon a time in love with Marcel Fleur! He broke it off. He came back to me at Boulogne the very day I was engaged to you; and I told him I was engaged to you; and then——"

And then?

After that, what should she say?

Should she say, "I told him that I loved him better than you, and I offered to give you up, but he would not let me, because he was afraid you would revenge yourself on him by withdrawing your money and support from him, and ruining his chances?"

Was that what she was to say to George?

She turned her head a little and looked at him. Their eyes met. Utter confidence in her, and an immense content with life, were mirrored in those quiet steel-grey depths. She looked into them; that new glorious sensation of entire security from harm or trouble swept over her, and the sharp emotions of the evening gradually subsided. The scene with Marcel receded into an infinite distance. After all, what did it matter? She hated and despised Marcel. She read him like a book now, and except for his genius she saw nothing in him to admire.

Why should she disturb George's peace? Why should she wreck this delightful atmosphere of happiness and calm by raking up an old and silly story of her girlhood that was quite left behind her now?

"Do you admire Marcel very much, George?" she said.

"Immensely," replied George. "I consider him one of the unique personalities of the age. Think of what he has done. He is only twenty-four. He has

earned his living as best he could since he was a child. With never a soul to give him a helping hand, in fact, with everything against him, he fought on, never letting go of his ideas."

"And are his ideas so very valuable?"

"They are extraordinary," said George. "And not only that, but whenever any one else has an idea —any of these other great airship-makers—Marcel in a moment makes that idea his own, and improves upon it. He goes one further."

He plunged into a technical criticism of Marcel's characteristic points. Theodora listened. Warm words of praise and spontaneous whole-souled admiration poured from George's lips as he descanted on the extraordinary things that Marcel was accomplishing in the field of aerostatics.

"The wonderful part about him," said George, "is that he works so utterly alone. I mean to say he never consults, nor is helped by the advice of any human being. He experiments, plans, dreams, all off his own bat. He works half the night, and then wakes up next morning with a fresh store of inspirations. They seem to come in his brief sleep."

"Wonderful!" breathed Theodora.

But though she was listening to every word George said, her brain was following its own line of thought.

"I don't believe in Marcel," she was thinking.

"He is a wild, untrammelled creature, but absolutely sincere," went on George.

"To-night," thought Theodora, "I read Marcel as I have never done before. While George is praising him like this an instinct tells me there is something going on that George is absolutely unconscious of."

"He is perfectly straight!" said George.

"I never dreamed he could have proved such a master at deception!" thought Theodora.

She recalled the fire in his eyes to-night as he had cried passionately, "Lies! lies! lies!" And

then her mind travelled to the way his voice had changed and trembled and implored her to believe in him.

"And I almost did! I almost believed that I was wronging him, so cleverly did he manage his *rôle*. I was on the verge of being convinced."

"He is a brick!" said George.

"I believe there is some trickery going on. Why should Ivan's presence be kept a secret? What is the meaning of all that mystery? Obviously, Ivan is working, too, in the syndicate's house, helping Marcel. And yet George knows nothing about it!"

Side by side they sat there, very close to each other, one talking, the other responding, but each following an utterly different line of thought.

"To-morrow," said George, taking her little white hand in both his, "I'm going to leave you for a whole day, alas!"

"Where are you going?"

"The Duke and I are going with Marcel to Melun to see the progress of the machine."

Theodora jumped up suddenly.

"Don't look so gloomy," she cried. "A flying-machine is a much newer toy for mankind than a wife."

"I'm not mankind," said George.

"But perhaps you're mankind in the making," she cried flippantly; and as George moved after her she laughed and threw out over her shoulder, "I can fly, too. I am going to write to mamma to tell her what a success the dinner has been."

With that she flew down the room like the wind; but for all her swiftness George caught her before she reached the door. He seized her in his arms and kissed her several times.

"You seem to forget that I am forty," he said. "Are you bent on making me young again? Whether or not that is your intention, it is what you are doing, Theodora. . . . To-morrow, while I am away,

promise me you won't get lost in any more mysterious houses ?"

She smiled, but made no answer. Standing there in George's arms, with the great empty salon behind her, the dying candles shedding gold light into the shadows, and midnight striking over the city, she was seized with a sudden determination.

"To-morrow I will go and see Ivan," she was thinking. "While they are all away at Melun I will seize the opportunity to go and unravel this mystery —for George's sake."

That was how she put it.

CHAPTER XI

"IVAN, are you not surprised to see me?"

"No! I knew you would come."

"But I said I should not."

"Yes, but I knew you would."

He stood before her in a humble, deprecating attitude, holding his hands together.

The roseate, tell-tale hue still tinged his cheek and other parts of his face that needed no such tingeing; but his old blue eyes were full of that strange look of dogged persistence, mingled with deep kindliness, that made one overlook everything else about him.

"I want to talk to you," she said. "Ivan!"

Leaning forward a little, she looked into his face. Her radiant beauty, set off against her Russian sables, seemed to fill the vast room with light. A bewitching sweetness played about her lips. Her eyes were full of a soft appeal.

She looked just what she was at that moment—a lovely child, going to ask a favour of an old man.

"Ivan, I want you to help me," she said.

She expected him to break into a perfect flood of incoherent assurances of his joy at doing anything to help her, but instead he sat still, looking at her in silence.

"Did you hear me, Ivan?" she asked in surprise.

She was astonished at his reply.

"Yes," he said; "but will you tell me what it is before I answer?"

"But, Ivan——"

Well, after all, she had no right to command him

now! He was no longer a peasant at Grindolstol! She had no shadow of authority over him under the present conditions! Yet for all that the blood flew to her cheeks, and her eyes flashed for a moment at the thought that Ivan should hesitate to obey her.

"What do you mean by that, Ivan?" she asked, making a direct onslaught.

"She knows what I mean, my Princess's little one," he said sagely, "she understands. No need for Ivan to tell her."

"Understands what?"

But Ivan had his own refuge, to which he always escaped when hard pressed.

It was a grey, rambling, ramshackle mansion of the brain, and over its portal was written "Haze and Vagueness," and underneath that inscription might have been added "Only lunatics are admitted here." Was he a lunatic, Ivan? He had flown to the ramshackle house on the instant, and was so vague and incoherent that Theodora boiled with impatience.

She grew quite petulant as he went rambling on in a long, disconnected apostrophe about nothing in particular, with occasional hints at mysterious secrets, of cruelty and orders that he dared not disobey.

"I know very well there are secrets," said Theodora. "It does not take much gumption to discover that."

"But I must keep them to myself," said Ivan.

She was perfectly aware that by a little cunning and cajolery she could win from Ivan the most deadly secret imaginable.

But could she stoop to cunning and cajolery? Her mind fought a rapid battle with the question. No! It was impossible to act like that.

She leaned back in her chair and stared perplexedly before her.

"You want to know why I am here, and what I am doing," said Ivan. "It must be that you have

come to find out. I would tell you if I could. You believe that, don't you?" He broke off.

"Yes," said Theodora, humouring him.

"I can't tell you."

"Never mind."

"I daren't."

"Very well."

"Believe me, he has been my saviour," he went on. "I say this because I know that you suspect him. I read that in your eyes. It is written in the atmosphere about you. Hatred and suspicion! They are quite clear to Ivan's eyes. Ah, tell me, my Princess's little one," he said pleadingly, "why do you hate Marcel Fleur so?"

She had no time to answer him.

Some one was at the door. Next moment it was thrown open, and there in the doorway, looking in on them, was the young inventor.

"You have forgotten to lock Marcel Fleur out," he said in a low voice.

Theodora stared at him in petrified silence.

"I thought you were at Melun," she said, recovering herself with a tremendous effort.

"And that is why you are here," said Marcel.

"Exactly. An excellent reason, is it not?"

Ivan had crept into the background.

"Excellent," said Marcel.

"But, good as it is, it is not my only reason," said Theodora, spiritedly.

"No?"

"My reason in chief for coming here to-day is to discover to what extent you are imposing on my husband."

Her eyes flashed into his with a glance that he did his best to meet without wavering.

"You talk like a penny dreadful," he said with a shrug.

But her look held him captive. It never left him for a second.

"I want to find out what you are doing with Ivan, and why you have kept his presence a profound secret from my husband, who has been your best friend."

As she spoke she was struck with the peculiar pallor of Marcel's face. Always colourless and unhealthy looking, it was now more than ordinarily pale. He looked desperately ill.

While she was thinking this, he put out his hand and laid it on the table to steady himself.

"Are you ill?" she cried involuntarily.

"No, no!" But as he spoke he gave a deep sigh.

It flashed across her that never in her life before had she heard him sigh.

She had seen him white with rage and ablaze with determination, and she had seen him in the deepest depths of melancholy and depression that time at Viareggio, when he decided that he must keep his mind free from love and devote himself wholly to ambition. And she had seen his eyes full of sorrow, and soft with an indescribable tenderness —but that was rarely—but never had she known him to sigh.

"I am sure you are ill," she cried impetuously.

He put out his hand with a groping movement, feeling in the air about him for something to cling to. She made a step forward involuntarily.

"Oh!" she breathed.

He was swaying.

"Marcel!" she cried.

But before she could move a step he was down like a log.

"Ivan!" she cried distractedly over her shoulder. But where was Ivan?

He made no sign. And when her eyes swept round the room in search of him, she found, to her terror, that he had disappeared.

For a moment she was frightened, but she had sufficient self-possession to drag Marcel into an easier

posture, and then to throw open one of the windows. At last she found some brandy in a bottle, probably of Ivan's ownership.

After fanning him with a newspaper for several moments, she saw his eyelids quiver a little. Then a few deep sighs followed.

"It was Ivan," he murmured in a faint voice that was little more than a sigh.

"What was Ivan?" asked Theodora, gently.

"It was Ivan who told you."

"What was there to tell me?"

A sudden resolution seized her.

Bending over him, she whispered in tones of melting sweetness, "While you have the chance, Marcel, won't you confess the truth to me about Ivan? Why do you keep him secret here?"

His eyes looked up at her fearfully.

"I have guessed the truth," she went on.

She was exquisitely gentle.

"It is that you could do nothing without him."

"Cruel," he said weakly.

"Yes, I am horribly cruel," said Theodora, "and I know it. But"—she paused and sighed heavily—"well, I can't help it. I stumbled on this thing by the merest accident. But now I have begun to understand I must know the truth."

She would hypnotise him into confession. His mental and physical condition put him at her mercy. He had been working early and late without food, and brooding over her marriage at the same time. And here he was at the end of his tether for the moment, used-up, over-strained, almost collapsing.

"Ivan drinks like a fish," he murmured. "He could never arrive."

"And are you helping him to arrive?" said Theodora, sternly. "You are hanging on him, using him, paying him as little as possible, I suppose. Making lots of money yourself, and deceiving every one."

She had helped him to an armchair now, and was seating herself near him.

"Ah, Marcel, I little dreamt I should find you out like this."

He bent his head on his hand, resting his elbow on the arm of his chair.

Theodora looked at him. She could see the black, straight hair, as fine as silk, that she remembered so well. The deep eyes, narrow, and as cold at times as they were warm at others, were hidden. But she knew them capable of tenderness as well as penetration, and of kindness and cruelty. There were the two deep lines down the side of his mouth. There was the inscrutable mouth—devilish, wise, yet somehow suggestive of nothing *blasé* or bored or boring, but intensely alive. It was like Vasari's portrait of Lorenzo di Medici in the Uffizzi. He was just enough like the portrait to show where there were limits to his penetration and subtlety, where there was a drying up of his tenderness, where there was an end of his fascination.

"If I could explain to you the mechanism of my brain," he began, in a broken voice, "and make you see the tricks that fate plays with me, you would have nothing but pity. *Mon Dieu!* How I have suffered! . . . I get the idea. . . . It dances before me like a sort of will-o'-the-wisp. I rush at it. It is gone. . . . I can't carry out the suggestion. . . . A cloud comes down, overshadowing the keen, bright edge of thought that would have cut its way through any mist, through any difficulty, if I could only have kept it bright. . . ."

He paused.

"It seems like a sort of intermittent catalepsy,' he said. "Oh, sometimes, Theodora, there are moments when I could dash my head against a wall to get rid of the incubus, whatever it is. It is like a nightmare. Yes! It is like one of those dreams where you see gold lying at your feet. Heaps of shining sovereigns are all over the path in front of you, and you are

a poor and desperate wretch. You stoop in an agony of delight to pick them up. A gorgeous vision of filled pockets and heavy purse drives you to the seventh heaven. You stoop. Your hand goes out. But you cannot stoop low enough. They are out of your reach. You wake. They are gone."

"I know that dream," said Theodora, quickly.

"Every one knows it," said Marcel.

"Every one who has been poor enough," said Theodora, sadly. "How often have I dreamt it myself! At the Pension Ducré, for instance."

"*You* know it is a dream," said Marcel. "It has come to you in your sleep time. Painful and horrible as it is, it has never been anything more than a nightmare. But think what it is to have that nightmare, not in your sleep, but in your waking hours, when your highest vitality is demanded! Think what it is to be stopped from picking up the magic gold which your own unusual inventive faculties promise you with such lavishness! Think what it is, Theodora, to live day by day with that sort of horror! Then you will understand what it meant to me to find some one who could always go on just where I left off. That some one was Ivan. Ivan could revive the image that had faded. He could give me back in its fullest efficacy my lost idea that had grown nebulous and vague."

She had turned in her chair, and was gazing at him intently.

"Do you understand me?" he asked.

"I am trying to."

"A flying machine should attack and subdue the air, and never give the air an opportunity of attacking or subduing it," he went on, growing excited as he spoke. "It should smite the air intelligently and as a master. Its well-directed thrusts should elicit in every instance an upward and forward recoil."

"Yes."

Nothing pleases a woman more than any sort of

technical disquisition from a man about his work. The more technical it is, the less she understands it. And the less she understands it, the more she is flattered. Her ignorance passes her by. She soars above it. And up there, in sublime regions, she sweeps round with a heavenly smile. She is full of wonder and delight at the dizzy pinnacle to which the confiding man has raised her.

Her eyes told him to go on.

"Mine is no mere aeroplane whose fine movements could be controlled by machinery that was delicate enough. No! I have been able to subjugate crass materials to my will—Ivan and I. By a subtle combination of the ability to appreciate the value of radio-active elements, with an unerring power of continued mathematical analysis, we are achieving that final conquest of the air which men have dreamed of since the time of Dædalus and Icarus!"

All the poetry in Theodora's nature responded to those last words, that went echoing through the attic, "Which men have dreamed of since the time of Dædalus and Icarus."

"It is a mistake that flight is a mere matter of levity and power. That is all wrong. No machine, however light and powerful, will ever fly whose travelling surfaces are not properly fashioned and properly applied to the air. Our invention imitates the motion of a great bird like the albatross. The movements are so exactly regulated and controlled that it appears as if it is animated by a brain. There is no necessity for air-sacs, so well have Ivan and I thought out the intricate details of construction."

Again the poetry in Theodora had been touched and responded. This time it was the words "*Like the albatross.*" They fired her imagination. She forgot the attic and all the surroundings.

"Yet, magnificent as appears the movement of the albatross, that great bird which Coleridge's poem has endeared to all the world, Ivan and I both think that

for the student of aviation the ungainly Australian stork, with its comparatively heavy body and short spreading wings, affords a more useful example of the far-reaching ideas of natural design, in greatest accomplishment with the least means—least mechanism. That was the model that Hargrave, of Sydney, studied in his careful and unselfish experiments. His was the true scientific spirit, giving all his results to the world without hope of gain or reward. There are few like him (like Charles Darwin, too—Darwin and Hargrave —to compare the antipodes!). If only the co-ordinating movements which are necessary to the complete control of the air by a machine are once recognised the whole problem is solved. We have worked out thoroughly the idea of the vibration of the wings and the material of which they must be composed. It only remains to find a way in which the impulse can be immediately transmitted from the peripheral parts of the machine to myself—the god of the machine. And then again, that the necessary orders and impulses should be sent out to its motoring appliances. Insoluble that seems. But we will find it."

With fingers gentle as a monk's, dusk touched the chairs, the table, the walls, the floor, as if to make all sacred. Harshness went out of everything, slowly and imperceptibly stolen away by those creeping fingers. Walls and floor deepened in tone. They grew soft and impalpable as a sky or a sea, or some rare velvet from old Venice, with shadows deep as abysses in its folds.

The motionless chairs whispered of dreams as wonderful as De Quincey's Easter Sunday.

How often had Theodora watched this hour and longed to delay it; to enchain it in a girdle of old wrought iron, with mauve lights in its shadows; to prison it for eternity in the immutable walls of her heart.

And every day one could see this coming of dusk into a room. It never lost its spell.

But to-night dusk and dark and light were all one to Theodora.

For trouble in its onslaught slays first the aesthetic sense, choking it hard and quickly, tossing it scornfully aside, as a thing of no value at all.

"In the beginning I used Ivan simply as a means of bringing me more quickly to you," said Marcel. "You! You! You were all I thought of then. But now you are the wife of another man. In honour bound, I have to put you out of my dreams. I must tear you out of my heart. I must learn that you are not my lodestar. Work! Just the work itself, that's got to be everything now. I am right, am I not, Theodora?"

"Yes."

"I can do it. I can tear you out of my heart."

"You *have* done it."

"Yes, let us say that I have done it," said Marcel.

"Now you have a greater motive, work itself."

"Yes, but Theodora, I can't work without Ivan. I can no more do without him now than a man can do without air. He is absolutely necessary to me. Without him I should go to pieces. I have made you understand, haven't I?"

He was standing beside her now, looking down. His eyes were flashing with their old fire. All his faintness and prostration had passed. He was the old, impetuous, wild Marcel, and his face was full of appeal.

"If Sir George knew, I should be ruined," he said.

Theodora was silent. Here before her was rising up another immense deception which she was to participate in towards Sir George.

"All would be over with me," said Marcel, "if I give up Ivan."

"But why need you give him up?"

"I need not give him up as long as no one knows."

"But that's wicked."

"What! Dare you say that after all I have told you?"

"It is so unjust to Ivan."

"The only alternative is—I mean if you are going to betray me to Sir George—that I acknowledge Ivan and sink into obscurity myself. And that—well," with a bitter laugh, "you can imagine what that would mean."

"What?"

"I should blow my brains out."

"No, no!" she cried.

"But of course."

He watched her closely.

"What else do you expect?"

Was she going to give in?

"Once we were all the world to each other," he said, "you and I. Won't you keep silent about it for the sake of that?"

Her great violet eyes looked up into his. For a long moment they looked at each other—she and Marcel.

The psychological moment that comes to us all, deciding the trend of a long chain of events in resistless movement, had arrived. Theodora's answer was to make all the difference to her life and Sir George's.

"I promise you that I will not say anything to—any one," she said at last.

CHAPTER XII

LITTLE did the driver dream, as he deposited Mrs. Packinthorp at the door of her hotel and drove away into the night, what Mrs. Packinthorp was about to go through. Even had he brought his imagination to bear on the matter, which he was far from doing, he could never have quite pictured to himself what lay in store for that tall, svelte figure in black, gliding gracefully up the steps of the little Hôtel de la Ville.

As soon as the glass doors swung aside and Mrs. Packinthorp found herself in the dimly lighted vestibule, she knew that something was wrong.

Her instinct, sharpened by multitudinous experiences, told her so immediately.

What struck her at once was the total absence of smiles. When she came in they always smiled. Everybody smiled. There was a smile from the hall-porter, and there was a smile from the tall black waiter, who was always hovering about in these regions, though he really belonged to somewhere far in the background. And then there was a smile from Signor Baldisari, the proprietor, who was generally propping up the pillars of the vestibule while he twirled his little black moustache, and curled and uncurled an extraordinary pair of thin legs and great grey check trousers. There he was to-night, as usual. But there was no smile from him. His face had a cold look. The eyes never lightened at the sight of the tall slim lady in the large hat, who came gliding through the swing glass doors.

And then the wife of the proprietor, Signora

Baldisari! The most extraordinary thing of all was that there should be no smile from *her!* For her small round face, brown and cosy as a nut, was usually only too ready to burst into a perfect ripple of smiles and flashing white teeth and sparkling eyes. She was as solemn as a judge to-night. Not a suspicion of brightness was to be detected in the severe and gloomy countenance which she presented to Mrs. Packinthorp, as the lady leaned over the little counter of the office and asked for her key.

"Something is wrong," thought Mrs. Packinthorp. Her heart sank.

She had picked out this hotel, cheap and obscure as it was, simply for the reason that the proprietors were Florentines. And her worldly instinct had told her that she would find life an easier thing among people from Florence than people from Paris.

In fact, she had said to herself when she came here: "I shall get away from that awful business instinct and thriftiness of the Parisian, and instead—well, instead I shall have, maybe, a little less smartness and cleanliness—a different kind of cooking, and a certain air of 'let things go'; but, on the other hand, I shall have smiles, always smiles, and for a woman who is pushed and worried as I am, the value of a smile is beyond all computation."

That is what Mrs. Packinthorp had said to herself when she chose the Hôtel de la Ville—and Signor and Signora Baldisari—for her winter quarters.

"Are there any letters for me?" she queried at the counter.

"Yes, madame. I have sent them up to madame's room," she added.

"Oh. Thank you so much."

She turned away, and was about to go towards the lift.

"Madame!" Signora Baldisari was speaking to her.

"Yes, Signora," she said, turning back.

Her heart sank.

She knew only too well what was coming.

Before her eyes floated a vision of three figures.

They grew larger and larger.

They seemed to swell and cover the whole universe.

6—8—6! she saw scrawled in enormous figures before her mind's eye.

"May I speak to you for a moment?" the Signora was saying. "I haf very sorry . . . must be I must ask you"—she looked frightfully gloomy, and dropped her voice—"your bill," she said.

"My bill. Ah! yes; of course!"

"Of course, for me, madame, it is not matter. But my husband, the Signore, he ask me about it . . . allora—and so—it will be a very great convenience, madame, if madame would settle her bill to-night."

"To-night!" Mrs. Packinthorp repeated the words stupidly.

"It is six hundred and eighty-six francs," said the Signora.

"Six hundred and eighty-six francs," repeated Mrs. Packinthorp.

She felt dazed. With a tremendous effort she collected herself and managed to curl her lips in a rather pathetic semblance of a smile.

"Cara Signora," she said, leaning ingratiatingly on the counter, "do please forgive me for letting my account run on like that . . . yes, I know, it is simply dreadful of me . . . but, you see, I was waiting for some money."

"I am sorry."

The little dark figure on the other side of the counter seemed to grow stiffer and sterner. She puffed out her little chest as a pigeon might, and her small, squeezed-in waist receded. The great black eyes opened wide, and the eyebrows went up somewhere into the region of the heavy black fringe above.

At the same time her shoulders shrugged themselves up to her ears, and the little creamy hands were flung out in a gesture that seemed to indicate despair, protest, and resignation all together.

"Must be madame settles her account to-night," she said.

"To-night!"

The words struck Mrs. Packinthorp like a blow from a weapon. She felt faint. The vestibule, the counter, the dim light, and the little pigeon-like figure of the Signora swam before her. In the background the Signore was leaning up against the pillar with his twisted legs and little moustache.

"To-night is quite impossible, cara Signora. For instance, look at the hour now, and I must dress and go out to dinner—and there are several receptions and balls afterwards."

"*To-night!*" replied the implacable Signora.

"But I cannot. It is out of the question!" cried Mrs. Packinthorp.

"Why is it impossible?"

Why? Her mind revolved desperately round a score of reasons, and ultimately she held up one to the Signora.

"Because the banks are shut."

The Signora laughed. She threw out her hands and shook her shoulders.

"True, the banks are shut, madame; but what does that matter? Madame keeps no money in a bank."

The words and tone seemed to Mrs. Packinthorp the acme of cruelty. As a matter of fact, she had just deluded herself into the idea she had a banking account, and that in the morning she could write out a cheque and give it to the Signora, as other people did.

"How do you know that?"

"My husband, he knows."

"What business is it of his?"

"Madame, it is his business that his bills are paid."

"I tell you, Signora, your bill will be paid; but you ask the impossible when you ask me to pay it to-night."

"When, then, madame? When? Yes, when? That is what I want to know. If not to-night, when? You understand, madame, there can be no more of this putting off. We are poor people—poverini—my Mario and I. It is not that we are grasping. It is not that we are greedy. It is that we want the money. We have bills: we must meet them; obligations, things to pay here, there, and everywhere. How can we do this if our *clientèle* keep us waiting for hundreds of francs? Be reasonable, madame. Say to me now, frankly, if you do not pay your bill to-night, will you pay it to-morrow?"

To-morrow! Mrs. Packinthorp's mind swept wildly round the world of Paris. How was she to pay that bill to-morrow?

The Signora was watching her as a cat watches a mouse.

"If not," she said softly, leaning her dimpled elbows on the counter, and resting her little face in her small brown hand, "if not, madame, *you must go.*"

At that moment the Signore uncurled himself from his post in the background, and, with a silent movement, placed himself beside Mrs. Packinthorp at the counter.

"Is it not so, Mario?" said his wife, appealing to him. "I tell the Signora she must pay her bill to-night. She say she cannot. She say she must wait till the morning for the bank."

Mario shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, and as Mrs. Packinthorp turned to look at him, she saw an expression of fierce resentment in his little black eyes.

"Can you pay in the morning?" he demanded. His tone was full of studied insolence.

"Certainly!" She drew herself up. "I shall certainly settle your bill to-morrow," she said, summoning up every vestige of dignity which she could command. She stepped to the lift, and ordered the page-boy to take her up to her room.

"You understand, madame," cried the Signore, following her. "We wait till to-morrow, but no longer. After to-morrow madame pays—or—*she must be made to pay.*"

Mrs. Packinthorp opened the door of her room with a heart of lead and spirits correspondingly dead and heavy. Turning on the electric light, she discovered at once that the fire was not lit. The next thing that struck her was a large blue envelope on the mantelpiece marked "Urgent," and in the corner the name of a firm of solicitors. A pile of letters lay on her table. She opened them one after the other. Each one had the same story to tell. Bills! bills! bills! Most of them were accompanied with threats.

After she had gone through half a dozen of them, her lips still wearing that forced, unnatural smile, she suddenly gave way, and dropping her arms on to the table, let her head fall in helpless misery, while she burst into tears.

"*Dio mio!* What am I going to do?"

There was no time for tears. Even that solace was denied her. A loud rap sounded at her door. She jumped to her feet, wiped her eyes, and cried, "One moment, I am coming." She opened the door. The tall black waiter, fed on scraps, stood there, with a cold gleam in his eye. And beside him, in the shadow, stood a vague man, who looked as if he had no silhouette, so flabby and disjointed and utterly without outline was he. He stepped forward.

"Is it Mrs. Packinthorp?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You are she? Thank you, madame." He laid in her hands a document.

"For me?"

"Yes, madame, for you. You will please attend to it, *n'est-ce pas*, to-day?"

The tall black waiter bowed. They disappeared into the gloomy corridor. Mrs. Packinthorp re-entered her room. She opened the document. She tossed it to the floor with a desperate energy. It informed her that a legal process was served upon her by Mme. Claude Donot, to whom she owed upwards of 2000 francs for hats, cloaks, and underwear.

She threw herself back into the chair and lay there like a log for fully half an hour. In the whirl of her thoughts no solution came to the problem that was pressing on her. How could she get rid of this terrible incubus? How could she pay these people? What sop could she throw to these ravening wolves? They seemed, to her excited imagination, to stretch out over league after league of country, yelping, with open mouths and lolling tongues, for her very life-blood itself. She had gone too far. Her gambling, her extravagances, her wilful hoping that things would and must turn out differently had come to a climax at last. She had borrowed from every one she knew. She had exhausted her own capacities. She had even scared away her luck. What was left? Nothing.

Suddenly, across the grey misery of her thoughts came a vision of the beautiful Lady Allingham, with the red-gold hair and the exquisite Greek profile, dressed in white and silver, with diamonds glittering on her radiant head, and the ineffable loveliness of youth written in her violet eyes.

"She has everything any one could desire or imagine, and I—I have nothing."

Her eyes, sweeping desperately round her bedroom, fell on the newspaper on the sofa beside her. She picked it up and opened it mechanically. The first thing that met her sight was an article headed in conspicuous letters, "Blackmail."

The words struck into her senses. She began to

read. There was a report of a speech of a judge, who had expressed himself very plainly on an evil which was threatening to grow apace nowadays. She read on, fascinated. But each sentence, uttered by the learned legal light as a warning to mankind, was received by Mrs. Packinthorp in quite a contrary manner. Instead of warning, she drew inspiration from it. Instead of being made to feel horrified at the evil, she seized upon it with all her mind, and saw in it her means of escape from the present mass of difficulties. Little did that judge dream what effect those remarks of his would have on one whom they might well have been intended to warn. But it is often so in life. To air an evil has its dangers. The more Mrs. Packinthorp read, the clearer grew an intention in her mind.

The recollection of her first meeting with Lady Allingham had returned to her.

That was something she had often thought of. Many and many a time had she wondered what on earth Theodora had been doing there in the hotel. Why was she coming out of Monsieur Fleur's room, a young girl, alone and unchaperoned, at eight o'clock in the evening? True, she knew that Monsieur Fleur was not there. It happened that she had met him in the office downstairs a moment later. But still there must have been something—some romance, some secret story. How much and how little of all this had been kept a secret from George?

Then she thought again of the Baldisaris downstairs, of the Signora, with her set face, and the Signore, with his implacable eyes, demanding payment of her bill on the morrow.

"Money!" she said to herself. "Money, money! I must have money!"

Next afternoon she presented herself at Theodora's house, to find Marcel Fleur there alone with his hostess.

The moment Marcel had disappeared she plunged

straight into her story to Theodora, with variations to suit the situation and her listener.

"Do you mean you want me to—to lend it to you?" said Theodora.

"Exactly. A loan, not a gift, of course."

Mrs. Packinthorp had a sudden catch of the breath.

"Is it not dreadful of me to ask you?" she said. "If you only knew how I feel! It seems to me I could sink into the earth with humiliation. And yet—and yet what can I do? I must have it. I have come to a point where I simply cannot go on any further without."

"Do you mean you must have £300 at once?" said Theodora, aghast.

"Yes," she nodded, "at once."

"When do you mean by at once? Next week?"

"I mean to-night—at the latest. If it is to be of any use at all, if it is to save me, it must be to-night. Otherwise——" she paused.

"What will happen otherwise?" asked Theodora.

There was a pause.

"Otherwise," said Mrs. Packinthorp, slowly, at last —"well, there must not be any otherwise."

Theodora met her eyes, and a cold shiver ran through her. Something desperate and unmasked was looking at her out of those great black velvet orbs.

"I have no money of my own. I shall have to ask George for it," she said.

"You will see about it at once," went on Mrs. Packinthorp. "How kind of you! A special messenger after dinner to-night, perhaps——"

Theodora was silent. How on earth was she to do this at a moment's notice? What would George say?

"I suppose I can do it," she said hesitatingly.

"You *must* do it," said Mrs. Packinthorp. "There

are reasons why it is in your interests as well as mine that you should send me that cheque to-night. For instance"—she leaned forward and dropped her voice—"there's that evening at Boulogne when I saw you coming down the corridor of Monsieur Fleur's hotel—you remember?"

CHAPTER XIII

MRS. PACKINTHORP, with £300 in her pocket, felt like a beleaguered general to whom a strong reinforcement has suddenly arrived. She could face the enemy. In fact, there was no enemy. By sheer force of numbers, otherwise money, she was going to conquer the world. Three hundred pounds! There it was, in a cheque signed "George Allingham," on the Crédit Lyonnais.

A messenger brought it round about eight o'clock, and she immediately went downstairs to the desk and had an interview with the proprietress.

There was a little incredulity on the part of the latter, but a judicious exhibition of the cheque convinced her that this was genuine. Her smiles, and those of her husband, reappeared as if by magic. It only remained for Mrs. Packinthorp to be a little patronising in her manner, and slightly pitiful, but forgiving. And that she could easily be, under the circumstances.

As a matter of fact, she was beside herself with happiness and excitement. It was a long time—she could scarcely remember how long, in fact—since she had had three hundred pounds in her possession.

Next morning she awoke early, after what the French call a *nuit blanche*, an almost sleepless night. But she was not tired. On the contrary, she was buoyed up with happiness and that joyous feeling of possessing the world.

"What a thing it is to have money," she said to herself.

After her coffee she rose and dressed carefully,

and then, hailing a taxi, she hastened away to the bank to get the cheque cashed. After that she returned to the hotel and settled her account with madame.

"And what shall I do now?" she thought. It was Saturday afternoon. The first thing that occurred to her was that, after all the strain and worry and annoyance, she was fairly entitled to a little pleasure. She thought for a moment. Then she went to the telephone and rang up Ernest Chetwynd, a journalist friend of hers.

"What are you doing this afternoon?" she asked.

"I am busy till six," he said. "After that I am at your disposal."

"Till six," she thought rapidly. "Well, then, come for me at seven, and we will dine together at the club."

"What club?"

"Ah yes! You know what I mean—the Villa Rose."

At seven o'clock she was ready, dressed in a shimmering and very conspicuous Directoire gown of orange chiffon, hung with a tunic of gold and green beads. The corsage was studded with heavy gold trimmings. Over this she threw a magnificent cloak of black crêpe and marabout.

They drove away in a taxi. The driver muttered under his breath, "Pleased to drive madame to the end of the earth" when he received his orders. He was overcome, like a true Parisian, by her superb toilette and her inimitable *chic*.

They sped along the boulevard, past the Opéra, with its flaring lights, the wondrous illuminated advertisements surrounding the Place de l'Opéra and the Café de la Paix at the corner, with its curious crowd, where Greeks jostled Japanese, and Englishmen sat back to back with Mexicans; past Olympia, with its hordes of unscrupulous guides waiting for the unwary traveller, and its flare of music-hall lights and posters; past the beautiful church of the Madeleine, whose dignity contrasted so strikingly with

the loud glare of the boulevards; past the Arc de Triomphe. The cab went sharply round the Avenue Victor Hugo.

Few of the passers-by in this much frequented thoroughfare ever turn down Square Corday. Although dignified by the name of "square," it is really a cul-de-sac. A few charming little villas stand about it. Behind their high walls, with their iron gates, they wear an air of seclusion not often to be met with in Paris; and when one does meet with it, the charm seems intensified a hundredfold by contrast with the whirl of the gay metropolis.

Down this cul-de-sac, otherwise Square Corday, went the smooth wheels of the taxi, awaking gentle echoes in the secluded neighbourhood.

It stopped at last before the gates of a little quiet-looking house, with "Les Roses" painted in small white letters on the black gate.

"Merci, madame, mille fois, merci," said the cabby, as they paid him. Mrs. Packinthorp smiled softly. The words pleased her.

The gate opened with a gentle click, and a small garden was revealed, shining softly in the light that fell from the house beyond. They walked along a tiled path between tiny beds of violets and little bare rose trees, whose time for blossoming was over now, but to which the villa owed its name.

The front door stood open, and a manservant was bowing on the threshold as they came into the light.

He looked at Mr. Chetwynd with a slight air of hesitation, but Mrs. Packinthorp murmured softly in French, "It's all right, Friend!"

That was the password for "Les Roses."

Quiet, modest, inoffensive little "Les Roses." In reality it was one of the most audacious private gambling clubs in Paris. The police knew it well. It was not only there was no limit to the play, but there was all too often a certain shadiness about its

gambling transactions. Indeed, only the fact that it was frequented by people in the highest society, could account for the way in which the guardians of the law winked at its existence.

Mrs. Packinthorp and her companion dined in a charming room with little tables set out with shaded candles and flowers. Everything was very quiet. The dinner was perfect. Very few people were about, but it was a little early yet.

"What a dream this man's ices are!" sighed Mrs. Packinthorp over her Poire Melba.

But she was thinking very little of the dinner. As a matter of fact, she was relieved when the little glasses with their green chartreuse arrived, catching a glimmer of the shaded candles, and the gleam of her own sequins in their glittering green depths.

All the afternoon and evening one thought had been steadily growing in her mind.

All through the drive and the dinner the same idea kept recurring—"Now I can play again!" It beat on the portals of her mind like a bird at the door of its cage; and as she chattered and laughed over the champagne to her companion, she vividly pictured the room above, with its tables set out for play. In imagination she heard the click of the roulette, which sounded in her ear like sweetest music.

It was a great relief when Lord Ludlaw strolled across the room and began to talk to her and her companion. She was dying to escape now. She knew Chetwynd would not play. She seized the opportunity to glide away up the stairs. As soon as she reached the roulette table everything was forgotten. The hours went by in a dream.

Ten! eleven! twelve!

Three times Ernest Chetwynd came and asked if she was ready to go.

She played on and on. Sometimes she lost, and sometimes won. But at last a run of bad luck set

in. At one o'clock in the morning she had staked her last louis and lost.

The whole £300 was gone.

It was two o'clock when she reached the little Hôtel de la Ville. Dingy and dim it looked in the flickering light.

The waiter uncurled himself from his bed across the vestibule and came forward at her ring.

Late as it was he smiled. That struck her curiously. She understood the full significance of it. Last night they had had no smiles at this hotel for her.

"Bonne nuit, madame," he said, handing her her candle.

"Bonne nuit."

The words re-echoed through the darkness of her mind as she dragged herself wearily upstairs, and the infinite irony of it struck her like a knife. "Bonne nuit!" To her! She who had had £300 in her pocket that very morning had now just one franc.

As she opened her door and entered her room, there stole out to her an odour of dying flowers from the great bunch of yellow roses that she had bought in the afternoon and then tossed carelessly aside. The air was full of their scent. She went in and closed the door. Everything was in confusion. Over the bed was flung a gorgeous scarlet cloak that she had thought of wearing that night. Another evening gown was lying on the chair. There were hats that she had been trying on, laden with great feathers and enormous flowers, some of them half in and half out of their band-boxes. The whole place was in an indescribable state of confusion, and over it all was breathing out the poignant odour of the yellow roses that lay in a drooping bunch on the sofa.

There was something about the whole atmosphere of the room that made her shiver. Its melancholy was terrible. Only a few hours ago she had dressed in this room, in such high spirits, with hundreds of

pounds in her pocket, and her heart full of radiant hope. She had been so happy as she dressed her black hair before the looking-glass, and powdered her white face till it took on the unearthly pallor that she affected.

The bills were lying there on the table still, and the legal documents kept them company.

And somehow it had seemed to her that all those bills were paid. Now it came back to her with terrible bitterness that they were all just as she had left them, unpaid, and clamorous for payment.

She pressed her hands to her temples, and stood, a sad, swaying figure, in the middle of the room.

"Three hundred pounds all gone!"

She was too faint to stand up and too excited to sleep. She threw herself on her bed, and began thinking feverishly. She must do something. . . . What could she do? . . . Suddenly her mind reverted to Lady Allingham. . . . The hours stole on. . . . Morning broke over Paris, and Mrs. Packinthorp had made her decision. There was nothing else for it. . . . She must go again to Lady Allingham. "And this time," she said to herself, "I think I had better raise the sum. I will ask five hundred pounds. Why not? She will have to give it to me."

After all, what was the difference to Lady Allingham between three hundred pounds and five hundred pounds? One was just the same as the other. Mrs. Packinthorp's mind began to be inflated with delightful visions. It seemed to her that a wonderful and inexhaustible source of wealth was suddenly opening itself out before her, and quite legitimately. Oh quite! Never for a moment did she say to herself, "This is blackmail." She simply saw the Allinghams' wealth and her own poverty. For the rest, it was already becoming the most natural thing that her hand should be stretched out towards that wealth, and what she wanted should be given to her.

At four o'clock that day she presented herself at the Allinghams' house, and asked if Lady Allingham was at home and could see her alone for five minutes. She was taken into the library. Presently Theodora came in, with her hat and furs on.

"Ah, how sorry I am to disturb you. You are just going out," murmured Mrs. Packinthorp. "Can you give me just three minutes, quite alone?"

"We are quite alone here," said Theodora, coldly.

A sudden thought struck her.

"You—you got the cheque, didn't you?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes. Oh! but, Lady Allingham, such a terrible thing has happened—I lost all that money. It was stolen from me in a crowd. I am fearfully hard up—penniless again, in fact."

"Penniless?"

It was hard to tell which of the two faces was the whiter, Mrs. Packinthorp's or Theodora's. The younger woman trembled a little.

"How dreadful!" she heard herself exclaim.

"Indeed, it is shocking; too shocking for words. To think that after all your generosity and kindness such a horrible thing as that should happen to me."

"Is there any chance of recovering it?" asked Theodora.

But even as she spoke, she felt convinced that the question was vain. She did not believe the story; that was the truth of it. And she saw the inevitable moment coming when Mrs Packinthorp was going to ask her again for money.

"You were so kind to me yesterday," went on Mrs. Packinthorp, "that I have come to you again to-day. I know you are generous, and you have the luck to have money. You will help me, I am sure."

They looked into each other's eyes.

"I am afraid I cannot," said Theodora.

"But you must."

"I am sure that it is quite impossible."

"You must."

"I could give you fifty pounds, perhaps."

"I want five hundred."

"Five hundred! Oh, impossible! How can you ask me for such a sum?"

"I am very sorry, but I want five hundred pounds, and I think I must have it, Lady Allingham. Five hundred pounds is as easy to you as fifty pounds. All you have to do is to ask Sir George, and he will give you whatever you want."

"I cannot ask him," said poor Theodora, closing and unclosing her hands.

"Then," said Mrs. Packinthorp, "*I* will ask him. Yes, I. How will that do? It would be quite easy, you know. I could just go to him and say—well, I should say several things."

She looked at Theodora with a meaning that could not possibly be misunderstood.

It was no use playing a half game, she thought. This moment was hers. Lady Allingham was here, now, within her reach. She must make the most of the chance.

"Of course, this is all very silly," she said softly. "So much simpler and easier for you to send me another cheque to-day, and then—that will end the matter."

"How do you mean, end the matter?" queried Theodora.

"I mean, my dear, that I shall not bother you any more, and that your mind can be set quite at ease."

Theodora was white to the lips.

"I mean that as far as I am concerned, everything shall be henceforth and for ever a sealed book. I will forget that I saw you in the hotel at Boulogne. I will forget—you understand?"

"How dare you!" blazed Theodora. "This is infamous. I have read of women like you, but I never dreamed that there were really such people."

"And I will never mention either," went on Mrs.

Packinthorp, "that I saw you and Monsieur Fleur the other night as you came out of that gate in the Rue Cristine. I quite understand that it would be better for you if I kept silent. You see, I have probed Sir George a little. That was not difficult. Quite easily and quickly I discovered that he has not the slightest idea that you and Monsieur Fleur knew each other—had ever met—before your marriage. What a surprise the truth would be, would it not? Poor Sir George, why should we trouble him? I know I am playing the part of a horrid wretch at present, but it is simply that I am driven beyond myself by the pressure of circumstances. Otherwise, I assure you, this is the very last kind of thing I would ever dream of doing. And surely, I need not add, I don't like doing it."

She paused.

"And now the cheque," she said softly. "This afternoon or to-morrow morning, if you will be so kind."

"Impossible! I refuse."

"Very well, then, as you please. I shall tell Sir George my story."

"Your story," blazed Theodora. "You have no story."

"Sir George shall be the judge of that."

Theodora looked at her full in the eyes. "And do you suppose," she said slowly, "that my husband would listen to anything you said against me?"

"I suppose nothing," said Mrs. Packinthorp. "I only know that I want five hundred pounds very badly, and that Sir George perhaps would let me have it."

"This is sheer blackmail!" cried Theodora.

"Do you give me the money, or do you not?"

"*I will not give you the money*," said Theodora.

"Good. Then at the earliest opportunity I must see Sir George. I can't wait, so it must be to-night."

"You may go and tell him. I was a fool not to

let you do so when you first threatened. You may go and pour forth your iniquitous stories into my husband's ears and learn how a man of honour treats with women such as you!"

"I see."

Mrs. Packinthorp nodded slowly.

"The worm turns, eh?" she said. "It's very charming and heroic. You win my deepest admiration, dear Lady Allingham. The only thing is—*how are you going to account to George for the fact that you have already paid me three hundred pounds to keep silent!*"

There was her trump card. So her tone proclaimed.

"I am not going to account for it," said Theodora. "It accounts for itself."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it shows unmistakably to any reasonable human being that you have tried upon me a process of blackmail."

"Blackmail! My dear, what a word! It may be usual among foreigners, but really we—well, we don't use that word."

The studied insolence of her words was so artfully belied by the honeyed sweetness of her tones, that Theodora could scarcely credit her senses at such a phrase, "usual among foreigners." It was all she could do to sit still in her chair.

"Well," went on Mrs. Packinthorp. "I want your ultimatum."

"I have given it. I refuse."

"Really. Ah, well, then, I fear I must bring other measures to bear. For instance, Lady Allingham, what would you say if I placed in Sir George's hand such a charming document as the following?"

Opening a letter, she read aloud, in a light, half-mocking tone—

"DEAR THEODORA,

". . . Our secret shared only by you and me. . . . Come by the private way as soon as you can. . . . You know how to get in. . . . Ivan has been taken ill and may talk. . . . It seems like a fever, but I don't dare to call in any one, as he is so dangerous when he babbles. He has great love for you. Any moment Sir George might know. . . . I want you to see what you think, and come and give me a helping hand.

"MARCEL."

She paused and looked up.

"Now what do you say to that?" she asked coolly.

"You must have stolen that letter out of this room the day before yesterday," breathed Theodora. "I missed it. I——"

"Theodora!"

Sir George had opened the door, and was standing on the threshold.

CHAPTER XIV

It seemed to George that the spectacle presented to him as he came into the blue boudoir was the most malignantly significant scene he had ever witnessed in his life, blind as he was to its full meaning.

There stood Theodora, pale as a ghost. She had been weeping, but was now at a white heat of anger. Mrs. Packinthorp confronted her, with a crimson spot burning in either cheek, and black eyes glittering with excitement and rage.

The whole atmosphere of the room breathed such a sinister message of disturbance that George almost lost his self-possession. All its ordinary deep peace had fled. These two beautiful women, in their altercation, had sent vibrating cross-currents through the quiet air, till the very cushions and curtains and rugs themselves seemed animated by some evil spirit of unrest.

Blind as George knew himself to be to the real meaning of all this, a sudden strange premonition of the vast extent of his blindness flashed across him as he stood there on the threshold.

How much must have happened that he knew nothing of!

That was the thought that cut its way, like a blade, through the mist of amaze in his startled brain.

What clouds of deception had he been moving in? How was it that he had never dreamed that Theodora was keeping secrets from him? To what extent had

she been pretending, while they lived side by side, in such apparent confidence and trust?

"Am I disturbing you?" he managed to ask.

Mrs. Packinthorp regained her self-control in a moment. She was smiling already, perfectly cool and composed, giving her nerves their only relief with a little extra gushingness in her manner as she swept towards him.

"Oh, how nice to see you!" she said, holding out her hands. "Did you know I was here? Or am I expecting too much in thinking you came expressly to have a chat with poor little me?"

"I was looking for my wife," said George, gravely.

Theodora was speechless, and that was all George was noticing.

Her violet eyes were wide with terror; her little white hands were pressed to her heart. Her breath came in a panting way through her half-open lips.

"I did not know you had a visitor, Theodora, or I should not have disturbed you."

He looked and spoke directly to her.

Still she was speechless.

But Mrs. Packinthorp was equal to the occasion.

She airily took up the tale.

"Oh, but you're not," she cried. "Now do sit down and talk for awhile. One never sees you nowadays."

She motioned him to a chair, and sank back gracefully on the deep sofa with its pile of pale blue cushions.

"And you—won't you sit down, dearest?"

George addressed himself again directly to the silent, white-faced Theodora, still standing there with her hands pressed to her heart.

"Yes!"

She seemed to come out of her silence by a tremendous effort, and seated herself mechanically on a little stool.

"That's not very comfortable." He wheeled a big chair towards her.

She stood up, and he saw she was trembling. She sank into the chair. As he bent over her to slip a cushion behind her, he accidentally touched her hand, and found it cold as ice.

His keen, masculine brain, awake and alive at last to suspicion, after its long spell of security and joy, was beating desperately at the closed gate between him and the meaning of his wife's extraordinary agitation. Why was she white and trembling like a leaf? Why were her hands ice-cold? Why had she lost her very voice itself at the sight of him?

"We were having such a delightful talk, dear Lady Allingham and I," Mrs. Packinthorp was saying complacently from her nest of pale blue cushions. "I was telling her of a wonderful book I have just been reading describing a woman's travels in Tibet."

"Hers must have been rather a ghastly experience," said George, deliberately, "to judge from the agitation I find you both labouring under."

But Mrs. Packinthorp was quite equal to that attack.

"Agitation? Dear Sir George, what are you talking about? . . . Ah, you're looking at Lady Allingham! Yes, she does look a little pale. I'm so sorry. Well now, I must confess that when I told her the story of the tortures that poor lady was rescued from, it made us both feel rather queer." She shivered a little.

"Who was the lady?" George eyed her fixedly.

"A friend of mine. But the book was anonymous," she went on, with that dangerous command of details that makes a good memory such a necessity for a ready liar. "It was published in Paris by a new man—I forget his name."

"It seems a strange book for two charming ladies to be discussing by a boudoir fire," said George.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Women are strange creatures. What appeals to them most—is it not so, Lady Allingham?—is the combination of terrifically dangerous elements

with—pale blue ribbon, shall we say? It is quite an exploded old notion that women like peace and tameness. They don't. Men do. Men are always looking for that kind of thing in their women, while a woman is always more or less on the hunt for a tiger—either in the shape of a man, or a difficulty, or an adventure."

She looked at the clock and uttered a little scream.

"Good gracious! I must simply fly. I have piles of work waiting for me at home."

George went with her to the door, and, to his surprise, she beckoned to him to come into the hall, and there whispered to him that she had something desperately important to tell him. Could he come round to her hotel at five?

When he returned he found Theodora had disappeared.

He stood a moment lost in thought. He would go and see Mrs. Packinthorp, and talk to her alone! He would get at the bottom of this matter that was causing his wife such evident distress. After all, it was he who had introduced Mrs. Packinthorp to Theodora. He was the responsible one, and she, Theodora—she was but a child. He was a man in his prime. His duty was to shield her in every way.

It was past five as he was shown into the dingy salon of the Hôtel de la Ville. An infinitesimal fire burnt dimly. The light was poor and watery. But George was blind to all these sordid details, and saw only that Mrs. Packinthorp herself was looking up at him with welcoming eyes from the writing-desk across the room.

"How charming!"

She rose and moved towards two chairs near the fire.

"Ah, I see, you guessed that something a little distressing had happened, and that I was doing my

best to hide it to-day. Well, Theodora was entertaining me most charmingly, as usual, when the subject turned on letters or handwritings, or something *apropos* of that case the other day—Mrs. Dick Wolsingham's, you know—and I quite innocently mentioned the torn half of a letter that a friend of mine had left in my writing-case, I suppose unintentionally, the other day, when he came to see me and begged to write a note before leaving. And as I said that, quite innocently and without thinking, I took it out of my purse, where I had placed it, knowing that I should be seeing him to-night and could then return it. And I said to Lady Allingham, 'Well, my dear, you say that hardly two persons write alike, yet here is part of a letter written to a friend of mine! Now look at it, and admit that it is like the handwriting of Monsieur Marcel Fleur. And yet my friend does not know him at all! And I was just going to tell her who I thought had written it, when she cried, 'That is mine! How did you get it? How dare you pry into my private concerns!' . . . I realised that she was very excited about something. . . . But I do not see any need to dwell on that now."

She paused.

George sat silent.

"I was endeavouring to calm her," she went on, "by taking the whole affair as a joke, when she came up to me, and, seizing me by the arm, demanded the other half of the letter, saying that I had stolen it, and that I knew well enough it was from Monsieur Fleur. And, really, I am concluding that it must be from him, and her property, as she insisted with such vehemence on it, when you came in and put an end to the scene. That is the whole story. And here is the offending scrap of paper, at whose door must lie the blame of this silly quarrel between Lady Allingham and myself."

George's eyes were glued to the torn sheet.

"Rue Vaugirard . . . Theodora . . . and the . . . it is dangerous . . . love for you . . . me at once . . . our secret . . . aeroplane ruined . . . by the private way . . . MARCEL."

"Dear Sir George," said Mrs. Packinthorp, sympathetically, after a moment, "how worried you look. What is the matter? Surely, it is not this stupid letter with its few meaningless sentences?"

"You know that this is a letter which might be extremely harmful to my wife," said George, sternly, "were it to fall into unscrupulous or curious hands. Where did you get it? And where is the other half of it?"

"Dear Sir George, I forgive you because I realise how fond you are of our dearest Theodora," calmly interrupted Mrs. Packinthorp. "But did I not know this, I should perhaps say that you are hardly being quite courteous to me. I have already told you," she added, with dignity, "all I know of that letter and how I became possessed of it. If you do not believe me, I cannot help it."

"Will you be so good, then, as to give me the other half, so that the stupidity of this torn fragment may be removed?"

"But, dear Sir George, I haven't got it!"

"Where is it, then?"

"My friend has it. And he—well, I *fear*, he would want a price."

Then, as George looked at her as if unable to comprehend what she was saying, she added sadly—

"There *are* men like that in the world, you know, dear Sir George."

"And you call them your friends!"

He rose, bowed, and quietly left the room without a word or a glance.

"You shall pay for that!" said Mrs. Packinthorp, between her teeth.

CHAPTER XV

THE same afternoon, while George was having his interview with Mrs. Packinthorp, Lady Allingham had promised to go with her mother to a smart matinée which was to be given at the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt in aid of the starving poor in Warsaw, their native town.

The Avenue des Champs Elysées lay magnificent and bare in the red rays of the rare November sun. As they passed swiftly along, the double rows of chestnut trees seemed to stand like silent sentinels from the great Arc de Triomphe, their sweeping lines extending to meet the gardens of the Champs Elysées, with their beds now denuded of all their lovely flowers. Their garish summer music-halls, now closed and silent, no longer roused the echoes of the night as the latest café-chantant star sang her newest Parisian waltz-song to the crowd within, while outside, the penny chairs around the hall, outlining the beds of summer blooms and flowering shrubs, were filled with the typical Parisian crowd —Madame la Concierge, free for an hour; street loafers, sweepings from the boulevards; police, tourists, clerks, smart men in evening dress on their way to some party, or strolling after dinner in the charming gardens; the young girl with her fiancé and her mother sitting placidly talking with them, as is the custom, discussing future plans; in fact, a typical little crowd, only to be met with in a gay city.

The car glided on, across the vast Place de la Concorde, down the Rue de Rivoli, with its long colonnade sheltering the multitudinous shops, some

full of priceless wares, others of worthless postcards and cheap jewellery, past the huge Musée du Louvre, with its vast storehouse of treasures, on through the now more crowded and busy street towards the theatre.

Theodora and the Princess made their way through the bare entrance hall up the stairs towards the *fauteuils d'orchestre.* The theatre, like most Parisian theatres, is large, lofty, and old-fashioned, and the great actress, from whom it takes its name, has beautified it as no one else could do. The scheme of decoration, pale blue and old gold and tapestry, with the shaded orange lights, is delightful.

Down the gangway in the centre of the stalls mother and daughter swept silently, but their entrance nevertheless attracted much attention. Theodora, in a cream-coloured clinging afternoon gown, embroidered with silver, with a long black scarf draping it from shoulder to knee, a daring touch, one of Worth's triumphs, looked exquisite. Her red-gold hair and Grecian profile were shaded by a huge black hat.

All heads were turned in their direction.

They made their way to the stalls near the stage, just in time to witness the finish of an act from *La Sorcière*, with the incomparable Sarah, who was giving her services and the theatre with her usual generosity. The crowded and delighted house covered her with applause, and then settled down to criticise its neighbours and discuss things in general, before the next item on the programme.

Amid the buzz of conversation and the flutter of innumerable programmes, the curtain rose once more on the empty stage for a short song by Brahms by an unknown Polish singer.

An almost audible titter was heard, as a man, plain, badly dressed, almost unkempt, crossed the stage, and stood waiting awkwardly and nervously, while the accompanist played those four soft chords which precede the "Sapphic Ode."

The audience awaited with curiosity and incredulity

the singing of this strange performer. It came floating towards them.

"He has no voice," murmured Theodora in amazement.

For a moment every one was astounded at such a singer being allowed to appear. A shiver of annoyance passed over the audience. But almost immediately something intensely beautiful and pathetic came stealing out of the singer's tones.

He did scarcely more than whisper the lovely melody. But so supreme was his extraordinary art that the restless house was silent in an instant.

Theodora leaned forward in her seat, catching her breath. The exquisite little verse, so marvellously treated by the pure art of that unkempt man, was beautiful beyond description. The voice ceased. The accompanist continued the opening to the second verse. An audible "Bravo! Ravissant!" was breathed sibilantly over the hall, as always happens when the Parisian public is really touched. Then in breathless silence came the second lovely verse, finishing amid a wild hurricane of applause.

The Princess turned to Theodora with a strange, excited movement.

But whatever she was going to say died away on her lips.

Her daughter was pale and trembling, and her great eyes were full of tears.

"Let us go, mamma," she said feverishly.

"Already?"

"There is nothing more I want to hear . . . forgive me . . . if you don't mind," she added.

They made their way out of the heated theatre with its chattering throng, and were swiftly driven back to the Elysée Palace Hotel.

They were both silent during the drive, each occupied with her own thoughts.

"Let us have tea in the hall," suggested the Princess. "It is always so bright."

"No, mother, darling, let us go up to your room, where we can be alone," said Theodora, with a little catch in her voice.

Scarcely had they entered the room and closed the door when Theodora broke down completely and, sobbing, threw herself into her mother's arms.

"What is it, my darling? Tell me," the Princess murmured softly, when the torrent of sobs had quieted somewhat.

"Oh, mother, I am so unhappy!"

"Unhappy?" she asked amazed.

"I want money."

"Money! My *dear?*" The Princess could scarcely believe her ears.

"Yes, and I must have it to-day!"

"But, Theodora, what do you mean? Why? What is it for?"

"I cannot tell you."

"But why on earth do you not ask George? You know that you have only to say one word, and he will give you almost any amount."

Theodora trembled. "Oh, no, no! I can't—I daren't ask him. Mamma, will *you* lend it me? I can easily pay you back in a month or so."

"How much do you want?"

"Five hundred pounds."

"Five hundred pounds! My *dear!* What a sum!"

"I *must* have it."

Princess Golsky was a woman of the world, and perceived that this was no time for talking or reasoning, so without further question she replied—

"I have the money representing the sale of my small property in the bank. It was sold when George so kindly provided for me. You are welcome to it. It is only lying idle. I will give you a cheque now."

"Oh, how can I thank you! Mother, darling, you don't *know* how you have relieved my mind."

The Princess walked to the writing-desk.

"To whom shall I make it out?" she asked.

"Oh, to bearer, please," said Theodora, quickly.

"Here it is."

"Thank you, thank you," cried Theodora, excitedly. "I will send it off immediately."

She wrote a few lines, and, ringing, gave orders that it should be taken by messenger immediately. She was excited. Her eyes were bright.

Princess Golsky stood watching her silently for a moment. But she made no reference whatever to the scene just past. Instead she changed the subject completely.

"Dear Theodora," she said, seating herself on the big sofa beside her daughter, and enfolding the latter in her arms. "I want to speak to you about Monsieur Fleur."

Theodora started. "Yes?" she asked, somewhat apprehensively.

"What is this little mystery you are making about him?"

"What little mystery?"

"You know, dear, what I mean. Why did you ask me to ignore him the other night and pretend that we had not met before? What does it mean? Why did you wish George to think that we were both strangers to this man?"

"I had very good reasons."

"But that is just what I want to know, and it is what George should know also. This air of mystery is absurd."

"I cannot help it."

"My darling Theodora," said her mother, tenderly, "I do not mind your having secrets from me, but there should be none between you and George."

"Every one has secrets," said Theodora, evasively.

"One must. No life can be lived without."

"The less you have the better. Misunderstandings

and mysteries and things hidden away, with people who are living their lives hand in hand with us, can result in nothing but unhappiness. Misery! Tragedy! Heaven knows what!"

Her voice broke with emotion.

"I can say this to you because I know. . . . I have never told you the story. . . . Yes . . . there is a story . . . a sad, sad story. But never mind that now. That was long ago, long ago. . . . Ah, it all came back to me this afternoon as I heard that Krikoffsky sing. . . . How he has changed!" suddenly forgetting herself and Theodora, and lapsing into an excited reflection.

"*Changed!* Did you ever know him before, mamma?"

The Princess was silent for a moment.

"In Poland," she added, after a time . . . "years ago, if he's the same man. But I thought he was dead. . . . His appearance to-day on the platform was to me like a ghost rising out of the grave. I thought he was dead."

Theodora looked at her in amazement. A strange emotion was working in that beautiful pale face.

"Mamma, you are upset," she cried, impulsively. "It's I! It's my fault! What a beast I am to plague you with my worries!"

"No, no; it isn't that," said the Princess. "It's the ghost of a worry from long, long ago." Then, quickly changing the subject, she went on: "You'll remember what I said, dearest. You have no secrets from George. You must not. That is the fact of the matter. You simply *must* not. I am your mother, you see, and I know your temperament. It's mine, too, as well as yours. We can't stand secrets, we Golskys; we are not made for lies, manœuvring, and intrigues. You must tell George! I don't ask you to tell me. That doesn't matter. Tell me nothing! But George is different."

She paused, and looked into Theodora's face.

"Tell me, dearest, you—you care for George?"

But she knew her world too well to need any answer. One look into Theodora's eyes was quite enough to tell her, and just then the maid came and announced that Sir George Allingham had come for Miladi, and was waiting below.

"Remember," murmured the Princess as Theodora took a hurried nervous leave.

CHAPTER XVI

"HAVE you forgotten we are dining to-night with the Duchesse d'Ailes?" asked George.

"To-night, to-night." . . . Theodora looked distressed.

"I was afraid it had slipped your memory. That is why I came to you."

"How dreadful of me to forget! My head seems like a sieve to-day. I am idiotically stupid. I even forgot to look in my engagement book."

"You have had other things to think of," said George.

They were sitting side by side in the big white car. For a moment the traffic had locked them in its embrace and their progress was stayed. All around them were the lights of Paris and its shadows. Yet it seemed to Theodora as if they two were alone on some desert island—she and George. The rush and hurry of the night around them lent the car and its occupants a more complete isolation.

"There is always a lot to think of," said Theodora.

She roused herself, and began to talk at random.

"I do wish the Duc d'Ailes wasn't so vain," she said. "He's such a good creature, really. But as soon as he talks to women he becomes much less nice."

"That's interesting," said George. "A point of view shut off from a man."

"Yes! But to see the utter futility of vain love—I mean love of making conquests—you must see the

man's case from the woman's point of view, and the woman's from the man's.

"To a woman, nothing on earth is stranger, sillier, more inexplicable and incomprehensible than a man priding himself on the thoughts of women whose hearts he has won. I remember in Italy once, an Italian said to mamma of a famous Italian, 'Every woman he loved always loved him. He has had great success!' His voice was full of naïve envy. I remember the feeling his words gave me. Insufferable idea! Great success! Yet I believe that men find equally unintelligible the fact that women are vain of men's scalps."

Outside the windows were the bare, black trees of some gardens, motionless in the heavy air. In the heart of the great city they had some wild quality as of plains and forests. There was an atmospheric illusion, too, out there. Lights were veiled by mists into far distance. . . . Far across the gardens Paris glimmered dimly through trees. . . . Theodora thought of villages, dreamy and remote, seen vaguely across great stretches of unknown country at dusk.

Suddenly George turned to her and found her hand.

"Dearest," he said, steadily, holding it in his, "why are we talking like this? . . . Why am I saying things to you I don't in the least mean? . . . And you—why are——"

"I don't know," said Theodora, faintly.

But she was glad her hand was in his. They were close together after all. Nightmares had surrounded her. Half an hour ago she was begging her mother for money. Ten minutes ago she was being warned against the danger of keeping secrets from George. And now she was here alone with him. She sighed, and slowly, gently let her head droop sideways till it rested on his shoulder. "George!"

Her voice was struggling for composure.

"Yes, dearest. . . . Ah, for pity's sake don't

hesitate. . . . Tell me . . . what is it you are going to tell me, Theodora?"

"I am glad you are here."

"Are you?"

He could not repel that.

But he wanted so much more. He had fancied she was going to speak of Marcel. And that was what his whole brain and being demanded, that she should broach that subject to him now.

It was dark in the car, and he slipped his arm around her.

"You belong to me, dearest," he said.

Theodora had closed her eyes and was listening just to the sound of his voice. It lulled her. There was a quality in it that thrilled her—the deep male note that all her femininity responded to sweetly. As he talked she said to herself softly, "George's voice!" Her lips curved. This was Heaven here in the car, with the great world so near them, yet removed into an eternity of distance. This Paradise was partly a dream, and dreamland must be all one's own country.

Mrs. Packinthorp and her demands for money. . . . Marcel and his grievous trouble over old Ivan's illness . . . his second letter in her pocket, imploring her to come and see what she could do . . . the Princess and her anger . . . the cheques . . . the letter in Mrs. Packinthorp's possession . . . all vanished. . . they took on a ghost-like strain . . . they had nothing to do with her, and this.

"You belong to me," George was saying. "Sometimes I think you care almost as much as I do . . . then sometimes I don't know. . . . Sometimes I'm afraid. . . . You're so young and I'm so middle-aged. . . . I can't see how you really can. . . ."

She made no answer. Her eyes were closed. The white lids shut out the softness in those violet depths. She was very still there, with her cheek on George's shoulder.

"But you do," breathed George.

He held her a little closer.

"I know you do," he added.

He turned his head, and it seemed as if her face lifted itself a little. . . . Their lips met. . . . The kiss was long. . . . It wiped out hours of wretchedness, and made the terrible tangle of life that we must all face grow clearer and happily blossoming as a garden in spring. With George's head bent over her, his lips on hers, and his arm round her, she had her first clear vision of the tremendous depth of love that had been slowly waking in her heart all these months.

George had fought and conquered his inclination to speak to her about that letter.

"All that I really care about in the world," said he, "is you. But because I have got you, everything else in the world seems to have doubled its value. It's magic. . . . My only fear is that I may fail in wisdom . . . that I may not know quite the best thing to do always for you. . . . You see, I want so to shield you and guard you and give you the best happiness life can offer. . . . For life was meant for happiness—no matter what the poets say—and the women," he added with a little laugh, and his cheek against hers.

The tall iron gates swung back as the car arrived at its destination, and Theodora stepped out into the foggy gloom of the November evening. She went quickly up the steps into the brilliantly lighted hall, past the servants, towards her boudoir. Sir George followed more leisurely. Theodora threw her sables on to a chair and went over to the blazing fire.

She was happier that night than she had been for days. She felt once more her husband's all-powerful love for her, and rejoiced in it. Somehow she felt no one could harm her while he was by to protect and guard her. As he entered the room she turned her head, and the firelight caught the delicate profile

and the glints of her lovely hair as she knelt before the fire.

"Are you going to dress now, dearest?" he asked.

"No, not for ten minutes yet," she cried brightly. "Let us sit by the fire."

He threw himself down in a low-cushioned chair and leant forward, and taking her hand in his, drew her gently toward him until her head rested against his knee.

A little sigh of content escaped her.

"What does that mean?" he asked softly.

"I am so happy."

For some moments they sat in silence, watching the blue and gold flames curling round the blazing logs.

George broke the silence at last.

"I shall be busy next week."

"The aeroplane?" she asked smilingly.

"Yes. So much depends on these trials, you know. It is anxious work. The great public has its eye on us now to such an extent that one feels the tremendous responsibility—almost a national affair it has become."

"Yes," she said softly.

"I am going up with Marcel next week," he went on. "You see, to place yourself in the demonstration is an experience that might give a nervous system a severe shock. It might make him quite helpless, in fact. But I have no nerves—never had—of that kind. Too much mountain climbing all over the globe. So it is decided I shall accompany him in the aeroplane."

"Is it quite safe?" asked Theodora, anxiously.

"Quite, of course! How strange it all seems, doesn't it? . . . Such results to have sprung from so casual a meeting. Why, think, if I had not spoken in the train through sheer boredom to a dark and intelligent-looking boy whom chance had placed near me, one of the greatest inventors the world has ever

known would probably have been lost. Yes, the Fates play many strange pranks with us. But for them I should never have opened a conversation that day when we stopped for so long at—what was the name of the place——"

"Asti," said Theodora.

The word slipped from her.

She bit her lip.

In a second she realised what she had done!

"How did you know?" he asked in amazement.

"I suppose you told me," she answered, with an attempt at self-possession.

"But I have never mentioned it! Indeed, I never could remember the name myself—have never been able to recall it. The results so far overshadowed the circumstances that I had quite forgotten the stupid little place!"

"Oh, I am sure you must have told me," she answered vaguely. "I could not know otherwise. But it is time to dress," she cried, jumping up. "I must fly."

He looked at her.

Was she acting? Only one person could have told her that name! At that moment, as though summoned there by George's thought, the door opened and Marcel Fleur entered.

Sir George started, and with difficulty hid his annoyance as Theodora went forward hastily to meet the new-comer.

"I thought I would ask you to be so good as to let me drive to the Duke's with you to-night," said Marcel; "but I am early, I see."

He was excited, face pale, eyes burning.

"Yes, we are just going to dress. Well, I must be off, Theodora," said George, hardly looking at them as he left the room.

"I will wait, if I may," said Marcel, looking at Theodora steadily.

"Do——"

The door closed on Sir George.

Marcel's dark face underwent a sudden transformation. Anxiety, fear, anger, passion, chased themselves over his features. His narrow, gleaming eyes fixed her in a relentless stare.

"You must come," he cried, quivering with suppressed passion. "Only you can calm him. Ivan is worse! I am ruined if he dies. *Mon Dieu!* But I am ruined even while he lives. He will not speak, and when he does he cries our secret aloud to the world, and laughs in his delirium. *Sacré bleu*, let him die!" he almost screamed, "so long as for a few short hours he may recover consciousness and save me. These trials which come on next week . . ."

He grasped her wrist, his strong fingers bruising the delicate skin.

"I cannot direct them alone. Only he can manage all the details! Come. You must, you shall!" he cried, dragging her towards the door, his voice suffocated with emotion and rage.

"You are mad!" she said.

She wrenched her arm free. Her presence of mind did not desert her.

"You are mad," she repeated quietly and firmly, looking at him. "You know I cannot do so now."

"You——" he burst forth, furiously.

She held up her hand imperiously.

"Be silent," she said, "and listen. I cannot go with you now. What do you think? You must be stark, staring mad. If I did, George would be certain to follow. Surely you see that. Of course he would. Come . . . be calm . . . be reasonable."

She put her hand on his arm to soothe him. He stared at her. She hardly knew if he understood what she was saying, so wild were his eyes.

"Help me," he said piteously.

"Yes, yes. I am going to help you. . . ."

"Then you will come?"

"Yes, I will come. To-night is impossible, but to-morrow."

She wrenched herself away at last and flew upstairs to dress. It was very late. Her maid was waiting. A long black empire evening garment was lying ready on the bed, with little black satin shoes near it. But, late as it was, she merely looked into her room, stared at the things, and disappeared.

"What on earth has happened to madame?" said the maid, overcome with fear that madame would be very, very late for this dinner to-night if she did not begin her preparations soon.

Theodora had gone in search of George. She did not mean to. She had every intention of dressing. She knew she was late.

But something stronger than herself was dragging her to her husband.

She knocked at his dressing-room door.

"It's I, Theodora! Can I come in?"

She saw at once that a change had come over him. His face was different; he scarcely looked like the same man. It was hard and cold, and the kindness in the steel-grey eyes had receded into an infinite distance or disappeared altogether.

"Do you want me?" he asked quietly.

And then she realised that she had not the slightest idea what she had come for.

"Yes," she said stupidly.

"Can I do anything for you?"

"Yes, yes."

She was afraid of him. This George was some one she had never met before.

But, after all, he was George; and only half an hour ago they had been together in the wonderful isolation of the big white car, with the gleaming lights of Paris round them, and the crowds outside, and the black trees; and his arm had held her, and his voice had whispered the things that she must

remember . . . now at this moment she must recall them; she must not be afraid.

"I came to ask you not to be angry with me," she said childishly.

"Why should I be angry with you?" said George.

"I don't know."

"Are there reasons?" said George. "What have you been doing that you should think I could be angry?"

"I thought you were angry because Marcel had come."

"Marcel! When did you learn to call him Marcel?" he said quietly.

CHAPTER XVII

MRS. PACKINTHORP had left Monte Carlo the preceding day, and had just arrived in Paris, *en route* for London. But the journey, she had decided, would be delightful if she broke it by staying the night in Paris, and, according to her usual custom when she had money, she was thoroughly enjoying herself. Five thousand pounds all made at the tables! No longer need she cudgel her brains to get money; perhaps never again, in fact. This sum could do so much, and she meant that it should.

In her smart dark-blue cloth tailor-made travelling costume, fitting her to perfection, she was a noticeable figure as she slowly walked down the street, revelling in the store of beautiful and expensive things always to be seen in the Rue de la Paix. It was so delightful to feel that she could go into any shop and buy almost anything.

A gold pencil-case, the ends studded with diamonds and emeralds, caught her eye, and she walked into the shop and secured the exquisite little toy, and then proceeded in a cab to the office of a fashionable paper for which she was writing.

The lady editor welcomed her with open arms, for she knew the value of this clever woman, with her exquisite clothes, her strange, fascinating personality, and her handsome pale face. Mrs. Packinthorp had reasons of her own for keeping in with Mme. de Villiers, and was particularly charming to her, insisting on her accepting her invitation to lunch then and

there, and presenting her with the little gold pencil-case.

"But I am in such a hurry," exclaimed Mme. de Villiers, with a charming little French gesture; "I have only a—how do you say it?—a *demi-heure!*"

"Never mind. We will go somewhere quite near, and will be very quick. You must eat, you poor thing," said Mrs. Packinthorp, gaily. "Let us go into that corner restaurant near the Vaudeville."

She had her way, and together they had one of those delicious little lunches which almost any French restaurant seems able to conjure up to fit one's mood at a moment's notice.

"You often see Sir George and Lady Allingham, then?" asked the Frenchwoman, with interest. "Then can you not write me something in your charming style about them? *On parle beaucoup d'eux à ce moment-ci,*" she said, breaking into her own language. "But they are so interesting. The aeroplane, Sir George, and the beautiful Lady Allingham. Anything will do. Do get me some photographs," she said, laying her hand on the perfectly fitting sleeve of Mrs. Packinthorp's gown.

"Yes, I think I can manage it," replied Mrs. Packinthorp.

"Ah! *C'est charmant!*" cried Mme. de Villiers, enthusiastically.

They separated. Mrs. Packinthorp was soon skimming in a taxi through the long beautiful avenue of trees which line the banks of the Seine, towards her friends' flat. Her visit was unsuccessful, but she did not mind. She determined to take the Métro. back into town and go early up to the station. There was not much time, anyway. She walked down the steps to the station, bought her 25-centime first-class ticket, and stood watching the train cross the bridge and come thundering between the tall houses into the station, whence it would go on its

mysterious underground way through this Paris which clattered and rushed above it.

Mrs. Packinthorp stepped briskly in, as the smart little conductor threw the doors open with an unintelligible yell which only dimly recalled the name of the station. The long car, with its bright and shiny brass and wood and its warm-coloured red leather covers, looked curiously *chic* and Parisian. The touch of *art nouveau* in the panelling, which the French seem unable to resist—its dubious charms fascinating even the railway-carriage designers—added to the effect.

As she entered some one bowed to her at the other end of the carriage, and there was Mme. de Villiers!

At the same moment she saw, to her surprise, Sir George Allingham, seated alone in one of the little high-backed four-seated divisions.

He looked at her.

Their eyes met.

Not the slightest sign of recognition came into his face.

In a flash she understood the meaning of his manner. He had cut her.

She rose to the situation. Mme. de Villiers was watching from down the car. There was no time to lose. With a delighted smile she glided into the seat beside Sir George.

"Sir George, how charming!" she cried with a little air of affected surprise.

George neither moved nor spoke.

She leaned forward and began to speak immediately. Any moment someone might sit next them, or George might leave the train, and her opportunity would be gone. But for the next few moments he was at her mercy.

"I have been *so* wanting to see you," she said, "it was *so* unfortunate about that wretched letter the other day, but I can still hope to get it. Indeed, I am certain that I can."

She spoke rapidly and quietly, turning her head towards him, and making her voice carry through all the rattle of the train as it swayed down the lighted tunnel and screamed its way along.

"You see, I had no idea then that it was so important. . . .

"Of course I should have suspected there was something when I saw Lady Allingham calling on Monsieur Fleur at his hotel one night in Boulogne. But how could I know that she was at one time engaged to him, and that probably this letter was years old!"

George, hemmed in at her side, was absolutely expressionless.

"Of course, that explains everything, and how stupid I have been! But you mustn't really blame poor me quite so much, dear Sir George, for the absolutely innocent part I played in this little comedy, which I see is ending up quite happily. After all, are you not the lucky man who won the fair lady eventually? How fortunate that things turned out so beautifully! Dear Lady Allingham, with her delicate artistic tastes, could never have been really happy with Monsieur Fleur, gifted though he undoubtedly is. But without a sou at that time. Whereas you——!"

She paused.

Then she added with an air of charming sincerity. "You had everything. There was nothing you could not give her. Love, happiness, and wealth. What a delightful picture! I know Lady Allingham is like me in many ways. She loves comfort and luxury, and to be surrounded with beautiful things. To some women that is more than half life, almost more than love. And who shall say that they are not right? Not that I mean to infer that of Lady Allingham. She adores you. Her devotion is perfectly sweet. Ah, here is my station," she said, rising quickly as the train stopped with a jerk at the Place d'Alma.

CHAPTER XVIII

"RIDICULOUS! Absurd! All lies!" George kept saying to himself as he made his way home. And then he would hear Mrs. Packinthorp's voice . . . "at his hotel at Boulogne" . . . "of course he had not a sou" . . . "I did not know they were engaged" . . . and so on. Every word seemed alive. Try as he would he could not get away from them. And he knew that at last he had arrived at a climax of some kind or other.

He went straight into the blue boudoir, and found Theodora there alone, reading by the fire.

"I have just come in," she said, looking up. But whatever else she was about to say was frozen on her lips. Something in George's face arrested her first, then terrified her.

"Theodora, I want to talk to you," he said. His face was white, and his mouth had taken the set line that she knew herself to be afraid of.

He seated himself beside her on the sofa and looked straight into her eyes. She could not meet his gaze. Her eyelids fell.

"For Heaven's sake look at me!" said George. "Don't look down. Look straight at me. Why should you hide your eyes? What have you got to be afraid of from me?"

His voice was almost rough. An unpleasant experience it was to Theodora to know that voice could change so, and the fact that thousands of women through all time had had the same unpleasant surprise with their dear ones, held no alleviation. She

was frightened. She dared not look away, but her lips quivered, and her hands clasped themselves in her lap.

"What's the matter?" she said.

"That is what I want to know," said George, "and what I think you ought to let me know."

His steel-grey eyes held hers cruelly hard, she thought.

"Are you keeping secrets from me?" he asked. "No, no! Don't look away! Look at me."

"I am not a child to be spoken to like that," flashed Theodora.

"Are you not? I am glad to hear it. It is not a particularly pleasant thing to find childishness the characteristic note in one's wife."

"George!" Her voice broke. "How can you speak to me like that?"

"I have been upset . . . that's why. I scarcely know where I am."

"Tell me what has happened."

"I'll begin at the end. The beginning's too unpleasant. Were you ever engaged to Marcel Fleur?"

He knew the truth at once.

It was written as plainly in her face as if she had answered "Yes." She stared at him without speaking, seeming incapable of making any reply.

"So it is true," said George, in a low voice.

He looked at her, scarcely comprehending that he had so easily come upon the truth.

"I told you in Venice . . . I had a secret . . . and that I couldn't tell you," she said at last.

"Why couldn't you tell me?"

No answer.

"Why should you have kept a secret from me? Were you ashamed of it? Where were you engaged to him, and when? How on earth did it happen? Where on earth did you meet? Why on earth was it broken off?"

"It was long ago," muttered poor Theodora. She

was trying vainly to control herself. She made a desperate effort to find words. A careful speech and delicate handling were absolutely necessary at this moment. And here she was speechless, her brain in a whirl. All her thoughts were flying in disorder before George's expression.

She half rose from the sofa, but George immediately leaned towards her, and, catching her arm, pressed her gently back to her seat.

"Don't move. Can't you see you'll drive me mad if you get up and walk away just now?"

"I am hot . . . I want a fan."

He reached over and gave her one that was lying on top of her little galleried table of inlaid marquetry.

"Now let us get at the bottom of this. No more evasions, and secrets, and mysteries. I am the wrong kind of man to be treated to that sort of thing. And I thought—well—I thought you were the wrong kind of woman. But tell me the whole story."

The whole story!

She looked at him piteously. "I don't know what to tell you."

"Tell me the whole story of your engagement to Marcel Fleur."

It seemed to George that he was doing an incredible thing in putting together such words as those —"Your—engagement—to—Marcel—Fleur!" As they issued from his lips he was struck with a sharp sense of unreality that began with the words and rushed onwards till it attacked himself, and Theodora, and the blue boudoir, and sucked the life out of them, and turned them all into shadows. How could this shadowy girl-woman, here by the boudoir fire, ever have loved any one so far out of the picture as Marcel Fleur? It seemed impossible. For Marcel was no shadow. He had remained outside the process. George saw him as alive and dangerous, pressing his vitality painfully on his kind. He was the

only unmistakably real thing that George's mind was capable of focusing just then.

"When was it? Where was it? Come, Theodora! . . . You must see now that the time has arrived when the fool must play his part. I'm the fool! Let me have my cue."

"We were engaged—in a sort of a way—yes—it's quite true."

For a moment George nearly gave way to his desire to cry out: "Tell me no more. I can't bear it."

"Go on," he said quietly.

"It was before you knew me. It was all over. We parted . . . we said good-bye. . . ."

"Why did you say good-bye?"

"He was so poor——"

"You gave him up, then, because he was poor?"

"That is not true."

"What is the truth? Why did you give him up?"

"I didn't. It was he who gave me up."

"Why did he give you up?"

"Because he was so poor."

"Was that a reason, then, between two who loved?"

"It was—to him."

"And not to you?"

"No . . . not to me."

"Then you wished not to give him up?"

She made no answer.

"I must ask you to answer me," said George.

"I did not wish to give him up."

He took a cigarette from his case and lit it. It went out, and he did not notice. "He insisted. He gave you up. What then?"

"He went away."

"What did you do?"

"I—I—did nothing." The fan had fallen into her lap. She was cold now. Was he going to continue this examination on and on . . . till he reached

his own entrance into the story? . . . On and on . . . till he came to that day at Boulogne?

"You met no more?"

"No."

"When did you see him next?"

"A long time after," she answered low.

"Before your marriage?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In France."

"Was it in Boulogne?"

"Yes."

"Did you go to see him at the Hôtel de l'Univers?" The appalling cruelty of the question struck him the instant he had asked it. It was too poisoned, too pointed, too direct. He would have drawn the arrow back. But it had gone. He watched it. He was perfectly calm. He saw it wing across to Theodora and strike her straight in the heart. It was simply impossible for him to look at her at that moment.

"Yes. It is quite true that I went to see him at his hotel."

He was astounded to find that she was capable of speech.

"I do not like the way you are speaking to me," she said in a changed tone. "It is quite true that I went to see Marcel Fleur at his hotel. But that is no reason why you should speak to me in such a tone as you allowed yourself to use just now."

"Good Heavens! Do you consider this a time for *tones!* I am asking you questions of the most vital importance to me. I can't think about the tone of my voice."

"I must ask you to do so," said Theodora.

She knew no more, now, whether she was hot or cold. She was as unconscious of it as George of his gone-out cigarette.

"Who has been telling you this?" she asked.

"That really is beside the matter," said George. "It is ourselves we are concerned with."

"And you let them! You listened!" she said vehemently. "Oh, I never dreamed that you could do such a thing as that!" The scorn in her voice and eyes filled George with amazement. "I would have died rather than have listened to anything anyone said of you!" she went on. "If they had told me the most dreadful stories, the most awful things about you, I would not have listened. I would have"—she could scarcely speak in her agitation—"I would have killed them," she burst out, clenching her little white hands, while her face, with all the terror gone out of it now, stared proudly into his. "Yes, I would have killed anyone who dragged up things out of your past and came to me with them. But nobody would! People know better than to come to women when they have got cruel stories to tell. It's men they go to always—men. Men are so ready to listen, I suppose. Even you—you listened."

"I had to listen!"

George had a vision of himself and Mrs. Packinthorp in the Métro. Never had a man been so at the mercy of a scandal-maker as he, hemmed in there by that woman!

"No, no! There's no such thing as 'had to'! Wherever you were you could have gone away, or if you couldn't have moved you could have put your fingers in your ears and shouted at the top of your voice so that you could not hear. And if they dragged your hands down from your ears you could have got them by the throat and choked them."

The attack had completely changed. The invader was now the invaded. It was George who defended himself.

"I did more than listen," he said angrily; "I read."

Theodora laughed. "They always read!" she tossed out scornfully. "When they can't read any-

thing else they read letters. I would rather die than read a letter that wasn't meant for me."

"So you admit then that that letter was for you?"

"What letter?"

"The torn letter in which M. Fleur invited you to come and see him, and spoke of some secret you shared in common."

As George said the word "torn" it flashed across Theodora that, although he had read the letter—as she had already guessed—he had not read it all, and he had not discovered what the secret was. It showed to what a tremendous extent her loyalty was involved that she could feel glad even now, at this tense and critical moment, that the secret of the aeroplane and its inventors was still preserved.

"What else did your informers tell you?" she asked bitterly.

"I come to you for information," said George, steadily. "Heroics are out of the question here. We have got to tell each other the truth. I should like to know why you met M. Fleur again in Boulogne. Did you ask him to come?"

"Certainly not."

"Was it before or after you were engaged to me that he came?"

"After."

"Then it was after you were engaged to me that you went to see him at his hotel?"

"Yes, it was after."

"How soon after?" said George, doggedly.

She could have answered, "I don't remember," but she would not. Some sharp emotion had been roused in her. It was half-anger, half a sense of being injured. The whole result was an immense longing for just the plain truth.

"If you want to know exactly when it was, it was the night after—after—the Ramparts."

"But I came to see you that night."

"I know."

"Then it was before I arrived. I remember, it was about nine o'clock when I got to the Pension Ducré."

"Yes; it was just before you came. I had just been and come back."

"Why had you gone?" asked George.

"To see Marcel. But why should I explain to you?" she burst out. "He wasn't there. I didn't see him. That's all that matters."

She could have no idea from George's face what it meant to him when she said angrily, "He was not there; I did not see him."

Everything was returning to him now . . . he saw her coming towards him down the blue-lit garden of the Pension . . . she rushed towards him . . . she threw herself into his arms . . . "I should have died if you hadn't come." . . . And then . . . "Marry me soon and take me away from all this."

So it was grief that had sent her into his arms. Marcel had gone. She was heart-broken. . . . He pieced that much of the story together.

"Please tell me, why did he come to Boulogne?"

"To see me."

"Then why did he go away?"

No answer.

"Did you send him away?"

No answer.

"If you did not send him away, why did he go?"

And quickly on top of that he asked the supreme question: "Why did you not send him away?"

"I couldn't," said Theodora.

Let the truth come now. She was not going to lift her little finger to delay it. The sooner George knew all, the better. The Princess had said, "Tell George all!" How little she had dreamed of the manner in which George would drag the truth from her! How far she was from realising that such a scene as this could be enacted between these two people who she believed loved each other!

"I couldn't send him away because I wanted him to stay."

"You mean you cared for him?"

"Yes."

"Not for me?"

Poor George! His forty years fell off him and left him pitiful as a little child.

"George, this is impossible!" cried Theodora, suddenly. "You must ask nothing more. I won't—I can't—answer. We're torturing each other to death."

"Answer me one thing. Did you, or did you not, care a hang about me when you married me?"

Oh, how glad she was that he put it like that! Of course, she had "cared a hang." There was her loophole, and she rushed at it.

"I should not have married you if I had not."

"Would you have married me if I had been without a sou?"

No man asks that question unless he is quite certain of the answer. Before he puts it he knows definitely that the reply is yes, or no, as the case may be. He goes not out into the slippery dark with a problem like that in his brain, and it is all decided before he speaks. The sharp edge must be gone before he ventures. And George was no exception. He knew the answer while he asked the question.

"I am sorry you asked me . . . I'm not going to lie . . . I did think about money . . . I did think about your money . . . we were poor, mamma and I . . . you were rich . . ."

She could not get on. A tremendous wave of feeling, the deepest she had ever known in all her life, broke over her suddenly, and she rushed to George and flung her arms round him.

"George, George . . . don't look like that! That was all long ago. And I love you now . . . oh, I love you dearly now, George . . . don't you know it?"

"Who knows anything?" George answered coldly, not touching her.

CHAPTER XIX

It was long past midnight, and George and Theodora had just come in from a reception at the Embassy. The Princess, who was staying a few days with her daughter, had driven home with them, so the embarrassment of a *tête-à-tête* had been avoided, but she had gone straight to her own rooms on entering the house, pleading her great fatigue and asking to be excused from joining them by the fire in the library, where their custom was to have refreshments served when they came in late from parties; and now the husband and wife were alone.

"I should like just a glass of iced water," said Theodora, coming over to the little round table near the fire, spread with wine and liqueurs and cold chicken and sandwiches.

To-night she was all in white, and nothing suited her better. Here in the intimacy of the library, with her wraps thrown off, and her warm hair and white arms and shoulders gleaming in the fire-light, she again reminded George of Tintoretto's Eve. He tried not to look at her, but that was impossible. Her loveliness caught his glance and kept it, however unwillingly. She held out the glass for more water. It was almost the very gesture of that fair Venetian Eve in the Accademia, holding the apple towards Adam, who sits watching her spellbound, speechless before her beauty as well as her audacity.

Slowly she drank the water, staring into the fire, but knowing quite well that George was watching her.

He was seated in a big armchair near the fire,

and Theodora, without looking at him, felt her heart swell with pleasure at his nearness and their aloneness. It was the first time they had been alone since that painful scene in the afternoon. The arrival of the Princess had occupied Theodora completely for some time afterwards, and then one thing and another had intervened, and they had spoken no more together. And now? Were they going to continue that subject? Was it to be reopened and further held up to the light? Or was it to be for ever banned between them and buried where it belonged, in the rather bitter past?

George sat silent, smoking a homely pipe, and Theodora presently, without turning her head, peeped at him.

And then, as she looked, and let her gaze slowly rest wholly on him, there was something about the way he smoked that appealed strangely to her sense of pity. The firelight played about his fair, clean-shaven face, with its message of absolute honesty that no one could ever fail to read, even at first glance, and showed him tired to-night. He looked almost forlorn, clinging to his pipe as to his only friend, and as she watched she saw that he had been deeply and cruelly hurt. All the old light-heartedness had gone out of his eyes. A cloud had come down and crushed back the buoyant youthfulness that had characterised him ever since that afternoon on the Ramparts when he first held Theodora in his arms. He was not morose, not angry-looking. It was something more than that. He looked as if the well-spring of his happiness had suddenly been tampered with, and do what he would he could not disguise the change.

"George!"

She rose suddenly and glided towards him.

Down on her knees by his chair she went, throwing her arms round his neck and letting her cheek rest against his breast.

"Oh, we can't, we mustn't quarrel," she murmured.

"Are we doing so?" said George, coldly. "I thought we had neither of us spoken a word for several moments."

"Oh, George, George! You are angry with me. You almost hate me."

But in spite of her assertion she still clung to him, her white, silken drapery sweeping round her on the floor, and her red-gold hair in a cloud on his breast.

"I can't bear it if you are not going to make friends with me," she went on quickly. "I know I deserve to be punished. Nobody ever deserved it more; and yet—oh! George, try to listen to what I am saying. Try to understand! My reason for never telling you that I knew Marcel before and that we were engaged once was not a mean one—not a culpable one. It was simply idiotically childish—idiotically puerile—impossibly childish it seems to me now. It was just this. I could not bear to speak of Marcel. The whole affair had hurt me too much, and was too recent a smart to be opened before any eye—even yours. And then I hadn't the slightest idea that you knew him. I never dreamed for one moment that our lives were going to be all intermingled later on. I thought he was passing out of my life for ever. I determined to look upon the whole episode as something that was irrevocably finished. That seemed the only way. And so—well—that is my explanation of why I kept it all a secret from you."

She paused. "Had I known that you and Marcel were intimate, I should have told you all about it."

"You knew it in Venice," said George, quietly; "why did you not tell me then?"

That was difficult to answer.

She confronted the question. She was overwhelmed at her enormous folly in not having done so. Why, indeed, had she not told him then? In

the light of all these later developments, it seemed to her now that it would have been the easiest thing in the world to have said to him on that well-remembered day in Venice when he had first spoken about Marcel to her, "I was once engaged to him."

But, then, looking desperately hard into the matter, in her efforts to disentangle the motives and plead her case forcibly with her husband, she caught a glimmer of the truth. It was because her love for George was waking that she did not wish to drag Marcel and that old story forward where it might come between them.

"Will you tell me one thing?" said George, when she did not answer his question. "Will you tell me what your present feeling is for Monsieur Fleur?"

"My present feeling!" She started, and, lifting her head, looked at him. The violet eyes under the curly black lashes were full of confusion. "I have no feeling," she said hastily. "None at all."

"Is not that curious?" said George, coldly.

"Or, if I have"—she cried, carried away by her emotion—"it is a feeling that I would rather not speak of. I am not proud of it. On the contrary, I heartily despise myself for allowing such an emotion to master me; but the truth is, George—I had better tell you—I *hate* Marcel—I despise him." She threw into her voice a note of passionate vehemence.

"I am sorry to hear you say that," said George.

"George, why are you speaking in that hateful, sarcastic voice? It is quite true. I *do* hate and despise him. Why shouldn't I say so?"

To herself she was thinking, "If you knew what good reason I have for my scorn of your wonderful aeronaut, you would not sit there looking so cold and satirical—you would be angry—indignant. Heaven alone knows what storm of wrath would break out in you if you knew the truth as I know it about Marcel and his inventions——"

"No doubt you have reasons," said George; "but

as you do not honour me with your confidences, I prefer not to guess at them."

"Ah! George, George!" All the woman in her was roused now, and the colder and quieter he was the more she was determined to break through this mask of chilling politeness and come on the old George who cared for her. She rose from her knees and seated herself on the arm of his chair. Bending towards him, she put her arms round his neck and laid her cheek against his.

"There is only one thing that really matters," she said, "and that is that we understand each other. Listen." One little white hand came down on his hair softly. "Have I or have I not made you believe, George, that"—her words sank to a low whisper—"I love you—beyond all words—it cannot be told? What I felt for Marcel was simply the blind hysteria of a schoolgirl. But you—you have me wholly and truly—I more than love you, I respect and worship you—with every fibre of my being and every ideal of my spirit. Surely you believe me—why, it must be evident to you and every one, I should think. In fact"—her voice went still lower—"I am ashamed of myself sometimes for caring for you so ridiculously much. I almost wish that we were poor—that we hadn't a penny—that we lived alone on a desert island, or something like that," with a little laugh, "so that I could prove to you what it means for me to be always with you. It is happiness—it is joy—it is life itself, George, being with you."

No man could have listened to that appeal unmoved. George's arms went round her in spite of himself and drew her close.

"Is it true? Is it absolutely, entirely true?" he whispered.

"Yes."

She nodded her head, and her arms clung still closer round his neck.

"So true," she whispered, "that I wish you had

been penniless like Marcel and I had married you then."

There was silence in the library. The red fire, dying down low, cast scarlet and bronze light on the back of the books that lined the walls towards the ceiling. The clock struck one. In the dead stillness came from outside a faint hum of traffic—carriages, fiacres, motors—whirling home with their gay worldlings.

"But it is true, isn't it," said George, "that you married me without loving me? I suppose there is no mistake about that, is there?"

He felt her cheek grow hot against his.

"I was too foolish—that is the truth, and so I did not say to myself, when I married you, 'I love George, but I did—without knowing it, I did."

"Then if you care for me now, give me the proof," said George.

"What proof?" she cried gladly.

He put his hand under her chin and lifted her head and looked straight into her eyes. "Clear up all this mystery," he said. "Explain that letter of Marcel's to you. Tell me straight out, without any further concealments and doubtfulnesses, why he was writing to you to come to him. What was his meaning when he alluded in that letter to 'our secret'—yours and his?"

As he watched her he saw, to his horror, that all the colour faded out of her cheeks, leaving her as white as death. She drew a sharp breath, and her eyelashes came down on her cheeks. She shivered, and then she crept close and clung to him—"Don't—don't ask me that, George."

"Why not?"

"I can't tell you."

"You can't tell me!" he repeated. "What does that mean?"

"It isn't my secret. If it were *my* secret," she said piteously, "but it isn't."

"Do you know what it is?" asked George.

"Yes."

"It is a secret, then, that you share with Marcel?"

"Yes."

"I see. You share it with Marcel—you refuse to share it with me?"

Suddenly his cold tone changed, and he began to plead with her, for he realised that this was a critical moment in the lives of both, and that no half measures would suffice.

"Dearest, I am going to do my very best to understand," he said tenderly, "but you are terribly puzzling. I am absolutely in the dark. You are my wife, and we care for each other, let us say. How is it possible for me to endure the fact that you keep things secret from me, and share them confidentially with a man you once loved, refusing me your confidence entirely? What on earth do you think I am made of, that I can see a letter like that one in Mrs. Packinthorp's possession without being maddened? Come, dearest," said George, "break through it all, make the effort for my sake, be candid and sincere with me. What right has Marcel to write to you like that? How dare he say to you, 'Come to me'? What does he mean by 'the secret way'? and who is Ivan?"

She held her breath.

"Answer me," said George. "Trust me now and tell me everything. I refuse to say to you it is your duty. I simply say to you, do it if you love me as you say you do."

She burst into tears, but remained firm.

As that pleading voice ran on in her ear she longed desperately to cast everything aside and tell him the story of Marcel and Ivan. A fierce struggle went on in her breast, but never for a moment was the issue in doubt. She would die. She would suffer tortures. But she would not betray Marcel Fleur's secret.

"Do you see what is in front of us if you do not give way to me now?" said George, after a time. "I tell you frankly, as far as I am concerned, it is inevitable that an estrangement begins between us. I am a man—a man and a human being, and whether I am right or not, I know myself too well to pretend that I can go on living with you day after day, year after year, caring for you as I have done, while you refuse to tell me something that obviously"—he paused and he repeated the word emphatically—"obviously I ought to know."

"Can't you trust me?" breathed Theodora.

"It isn't a question of trusting you. It is a question of your trusting me. Why can't you trust me? Why can't you tell me this? Why can't you tell me all?"

He had thrown his pride aside again and was pleading with her once more. "Trust me, tell me, dearest," he whispered. "You know very well that I am safe where anything needs to be kept secret. I can say that much of myself at any rate," with a rueful laugh, "though I don't seem to be a great success at other things."

"I can't tell you," was all she could say.

"Is it because you have promised not to?" asked George at last.

"Yes."

"You have promised Marcel Fleur; is that what you mean?"

"I can't say whom I have promised," came the answer.

"And is that your final decision—in spite of all we have said to-night? In spite of your assurances that you care for me—is it possible that you are able and willing to allow the matter to end like this?"

"I can't help it," said Theodora, dolefully.

"Then you must take the consequences," said George, rising. "It is you—not I—who are responsible if things go wrong in our lives together."

CHAPTER XX

MRS. PACKINTHORP breathed a deep sigh of content as the boat train steamed slowly into Charing Cross and came to a standstill in the dingy station. The long line of porters, each eager for the most profitable passenger, dashed at the carriage doors, and she stepped quickly out of her first-class carriage. The long journey from Monte Carlo the day before had not tired her in the least; she had been far too happy for fatigue, and as usual she was smart and *chic* in the extreme, even though she had been travelling for hours. Her admirably cut gown of dark-blue serge and her trim little beaver hat were eminently suitable for travelling, and to look at her as she stood calmly and smilingly giving her orders to the porter, one could not help noticing how fresh and well-turned-out she was. She looked well, and she felt well. Coming from Monte Carlo she had been in one long dream, as she sat, clutching her precious little bag.

She tipped the porter liberally, for she was always good to servants and dependants, feeling perhaps a certain sympathy with them in their struggle for a living, and finding in her own mind some analogy between her hazardous life and their hard one.

"Tell him to drive to the hotel, please," she said, naming the famous place where she had decided to stay.

As the cab, burdened with her luggage, slowly made its way out of the station yard, she leant forward and looked into the streets with an amused

expression. Oh, it was heavenly to be in town again for a few days! She clutched still tighter, with nervous hands, the little morocco bag, which had never left her for an instant.

Everything seemed delightful to her. She looked at the brilliantly-lighted streets, the swaying omnibuses overtopped by the great and noisy motor-omnibuses flying along as though they wished to run over the people scurrying across the roads, like huge Juggernaut cars. Her cab passed the sweep of Trafalgar Square and came upon the crowded Haymarket with its two theatres disgorging their laughing, hurrying throng. The lines of waiting carriages, the shouts of the attendants hurrying to and fro, searching vainly, blowing shrill calls, and the flying footmen trying to find their masters among the seeking mob of well-dressed people, all thrilled her now.

To-morrow she promised herself she would go round the shops. There was much that she needed, and she could give herself a free hand for once. She wanted the sense of absolute freedom that London gives more than any other city in the world.

Paris was a tiny bit too small for her just then. The Allinghams, for instance, and others. . . . She would return there, of course, presently. The cab drew up at the hotel, and she went into the office and asked for a bedroom and sitting-room.

"No. 208 is a most charming suite, madame," replied the clerk. "It is on the third floor."

"No; I wish to be on the first floor."

She was determined to have a good time for once, and gave her orders *en princesse.*

With an apology the clerk offered her another suite on the first floor, and she was shown up to the charming rooms without delay. She felt far too wideawake to go to bed at that hour. "Why should I not go down and get some supper?" she exclaimed aloud. The idea pleased her. In a few moments

she had unlocked her boxes and chosen from out their contents a gorgeous Directoire frock of dull gold cloth, with a glittering gold-worked shawl draped over it, and falling to the ground in sinuous folds—a Paris triumph from a well-known house, which she had bought and paid for in Nice.

Throwing over her white shoulders a beautiful cloak of the same glowing shade and lined with ermine, she went down into the hall. She was wearing a long white feather, set far back in her dark hair, its ends sweeping down and emphasising the curve of her long neck. As she sat there quietly watching the rapidly filling hall she listened lazily to two men talking near her. One of them explained, "Ah, that's Rigos, the Mexican. . . . They say he's worth two millions now."

"Lucky beggar!" rejoined the other carelessly.

Two millions! The words rang in Mrs. Packinthorp's ears. She looked at the man who was approaching.

He was very young, twenty-two at the most, and was slight and graceful, with a lazy, attractive walk. He had a handsome face, with brown eyes and black hair, and an expression of extreme sadness. He seated himself at a little table and ordered coffee.

The two men got up and went into the restaurant. Mrs. Packinthorp watched them as they disappeared. She rose and moved along the hall. A slight accident occurred just then.

The exquisite gold-worked shawl of her gown, its filmy folds floating in the air as she moved, caught on one of the little tables and swept over a coffee-cup standing on the edge. The coffee streamed over her gown, making an ugly dark stain on the delicate material. She gave a sharp exclamation of dismay.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" a voice exclaimed with a charming foreign accent. "What *can* I say? It is all my fault for so carelessly placing my cup at the edge of the table."

Mrs. Packinthorp did not at first look up. She was ruefully examining her gown, ruined beyond all hope; but after a second she had regained her usual manner. One of her axioms was that it never paid to look angry, especially with men.

"It is of no consequence whatever, thank you," she said, raising her eyes. Observing the penitent look in his face, she continued sympathetically and charmingly: "It was all the fault of my stupid gown, and it deserves its fate."

"I shall never forgive myself."

"Oh, please, don't think any more about it. Really, it doesn't matter. I've got another one!" she added laughingly.

She was thinking he looked frightfully unhappy, and was wondering what was the matter with him. It occurred to her that he wanted to talk to somebody.

"It is too kind of you to put it like that," he said nervously; "but I feel such a clumsy fool. Bad luck seems to follow me everywhere. I have only just arrived at the hotel, and I am the cause of this accident and give you all this annoyance."

"What does it matter?" she said, "since no one saw it happen, and I don't mind?"

"Oh, it is of you I am thinking. I don't care who may have seen it. I know no one here," he replied.

"Don't you?" said Mrs. Packinthorp. "No, more do I! Isn't it dull?" she added, laughing once again sympathetically.

There was silence for a moment, and she began to move slowly away. He made a step forward.

"I do wish you would stay and talk to me for five minutes," he said quickly and almost excitedly. "Will you—please?" he added beseechingly.

She looked at him brightly. "Well, we are two lonely mortals; why shouldn't I?" she said suddenly with an air of *bonhomie*.

"Do," he said. "I am so lonely in this desert."

"Surely it's an oasis," she replied. "Look at the palm-trees and flowers."

"Yes, and the monkeys—I mean waiters," he laughed, catching her mood.

Mrs. Packinthorp smiled. "Let us ask one of them to bring you some more coffee," she suggested.

"No; I don't want any now. I only ordered it to pass the time," he answered with his charming smile.

As they sat there and talked on ordinary subjects, Mrs. Packinthorp was not blind to the fact that Rigos was staring at her, not rudely, but with quite open admiration. The tall, composed woman, with her striking oval ivory-white face, fascinated him. Her soft voice was so soothing, and she was so amusing, and yet kind and sympathetic, saying a good word for everything and everybody, in spite of her fine criticism and the accuracy of her views, which, curiously, coincided with his own. After a few moments she rose to go. She was not one to spoil a situation.

"I must be off," she said, "I'm so tired."

He looked genuinely concerned.

"Oh, how selfish of me to keep you here talking when you are tired after your long journey!"

"Good-night," she said, holding out her hand frankly.

"Good-night. But may I not call on you to-morrow and introduce myself properly?"

"That will be charming," she exclaimed. "Stay, let us be unconventional. Pay your duty call in the morning and come to tea with me. My sitting-room is No. 38."

He laughed quite gaily. "How delightful! I will come with pleasure. Good-night, then." His melancholy air had vanished.

Mrs. Packinthorp went slowly and gracefully towards the lift. Not until she got into the privacy

of her rooms did she laugh softly to herself as she puffed her Russian cigarette and settled down by the fire in an exquisite *peignoir* to read and think.

She awoke early. The room was still enveloped in the darkness of a chill December morning. She reached out and touched the button of the light above her bed and saw by her little travelling-clock that it was not quite eight o'clock. For a while she lay thinking.

To-day was to be a day of luxurious content. She would go out and shop and buy lots of things. The many little luxuries which smart women deem necessities and which she had so often to forego would be hers to-day. Then Count de Rigos would call in the afternoon, and that would all be charming, and then——

But she thought no more. The present was always enough for her. There was so much to do. Life was so interesting if one were really alive and had just won a small fortune at Monte Carlo. She smiled and touched the bell, and ordered her bath and breakfast; and presently, full of life and energy, she was sitting by the fire looking fresh and radiant, wrapped in a rose-pink kimono, enjoying her *déjeuner* and skimming the columns of the *Morning Post*.

An hour later, dressed in a tailor-made gown of Austrian blue cloth trimmed with military braiding, and a huge hat covered with ostrich plumes, she sauntered out of the hotel and walked leisurely up the Haymarket.

It was quite a charming morning for December, and as she strolled along everything seemed wonderfully delightful. There were so many things she wanted—a visit to a famous firm for glimpses at some tailor-made gowns, which she could describe in her articles, was an absolute necessity, and thither she went. After that she went to see some hats. A lovely one of real musquash and roses, with a brim lifted coquettishly on one side, suited her dark

beauty to perfection, and a velvet toque to match the coat of sapphire velvet she had just bought captured her fancy. She ordered both to be sent to the hotel immediately. Then, hailing a taxicab, she drove to a stationer's in Sloane Street and ordered her gold monogrammed notepaper.

As she was leaving the shop a delicate little edition of Browning's "The Ring and the Book," bound in soft mauve-coloured leather, caught her eye. "That will do for me to read this afternoon," she said to herself, with a slow smile, as she bought it. She dismissed the cab and strolled down Sloane Street until she reached a curio shop. The window was full of lovely things, and for some moments Mrs. Packinthorp gazed, for once with real and unaffected admiration, at the old silver and china displayed. Suddenly her eyes narrowed.

"How sweet!" she said aloud, and went into the shop.

"I want that little ivory and enamelled crucifix, please," she said. The shopman named an exaggerated price, but rather to his amazement it was paid without a murmur. An exquisite sketch of Donatello's "St. Francis"—perhaps the most ascetic and purely beautiful face in the world of sculptured art—completed her purchases. "Really, I feel quite devotional," she murmured to herself. "I wonder what St. Francis did. He certainly looks hungry."

It was getting late, and hastily calling another cab she was swiftly driven back to the hotel with her purchases, stopping on the way to buy a profusion of pale-pink roses and great Parma violets.

After lunch she changed her gown for a black one of soft cashmere, almost startling in its simplicity and plainness, and falling in beautiful lines around her slim graceful form.

She had been able at Monte Carlo to redeem her jewellery and breathed a sigh of relief as she slipped two diamond rings on her fingers.

About four o'clock a servant came bringing a card to her, saying that the gentleman was below.

"El Conte di Rigos."

Mrs. Packinthorp was sitting on the lounge in front of the fire. A great bunch of violets carelessly tucked into her gown, filled the room with their fragrance. She laid down the little mauve-bound volume of Browning as the Count entered.

"You were reading, and I interrupted you," he said with his quick, nervous manner.

"Oh, no, indeed you have not," she smiled, stretching out her hand and making room for him on the great lounge. "I was only reading something I have read many times before."

He took up the little book. "Ah, it is Browning," he said with his quaint, soft accent. "Oh, but it is very difficult to understand for me."

"There is something so spiritual and uplifting in the lines I was reading," murmured Mrs. Packinthorp, who opened the book haphazard and had not the smallest idea what it was about.

"Tell me about it," he said eagerly.

"No. Tell me about yourself," she replied gaily. 'Let us live in the present."

"I? What have I to tell?" Count de Rigos started, as if at his own words. "No, my story is too sad—it is not interesting, and it is ugly, too. Oh, talk of beautiful things," he cried impulsively. "Speak of yourself, or at least talk to me. For you love beautiful things," he added, as Mrs. Packinthorp, with a charming smile, held up a white hand as though to ward off his flatteries. "I see you do by your flowers and that lovely little sketch which you place alone on the mantelpiece, where most women crowd their silly photographs and china." He rose and examined it.

"I always love that St. Francis," she cried with enthusiasm. "Wherever I go I take it. It helps one at least to strive after better things."

"That you should talk of striving for good almost makes me laugh," he said, looking down into her upturned, ivory-tinted face, with its fathomless eyes which looked up so frankly to his.

"Why? Must not we all strive?"

"Most of us, yes, but you——"

She laughed gaily. "Come, we are getting morbid. Let me give you some tea." The glittering diamond rings flashed in the firelight as her long, shapely hands busied themselves among the teacups.

Count de Rigos did not answer. He was standing with his back to her looking into the fire.

"Come," she said, "I am going to be very stern with you. Here is your tea; you are to drink it and smile and talk to me."

He turned, and she was surprised to see the change that had come over his dark, fascinating face. It was white and drawn. His lips were pressed together and there were tears in his dark eyes. In one hand he held the little crucifix that Mrs. Packinthorp had bought that morning. He kissed it.

She laid down the teacup, and rose softly.

"You have something troubling you," she said, her voice vibrating with sympathy. "Tell me about it."

He was silent still.

She touched his arm and motioned him to the lounge.

For a few minutes they sat in silence. Presently she said softly, "There is so much sorrow in the world, and one meets with it every day, but it always touches some chord in me. My heart goes out to any one suffering. . . . There is so much grief and pain around us!"

"There is more remorse," he said quickly and nervously. The word struck Mrs. Packinthorp. Then he had a story to tell. She waited sympathetically, never moving. He seemed to be summoning up his courage, and almost brusquely he said at last—

"It was long ago in Mexico. There was a girl! Ah, but she was lovely. Dios! And I loved her and——"

He was silent again. His voice seemed choked with emotion.

"She did not love you?" murmured his companion softly.

"Ah, but she did—once!" he burst out.

"And——" she leant forward in quick sympathy.

"She tired of me—and——"

"And you cannot forget her. You love her still! How generous!" said the soft, low voice.

"No," he replied in his nonchalant gentle voice, "*I killed her!*"

CHAPTER XXI

"I KILLED her," said the Mexican.

Mrs. Packinthorp's face did not move a muscle. She gripped the little book she was holding in her hand, but that was the only outlet to her feelings she allowed herself. So he had killed her! She was sitting on the couch in a delightful pink-walled sitting-room in a fashionable London hotel with a murderer! The idea seemed for a moment almost humorous. She longed to laugh outright and loudly. Instead, she merely sat silent.

Her wits did not desert her, however. Like lightning she saw the part best suited to the situation, and played it.

She turned to De Rigos, her eyes soft with sympathy. No words issued from her lips, but everything was in her look.

De Rigos stared at her and rose. "I ought not to have told you. I have horrified you. You will never speak to me again."

She shook her head slightly as if to reassure him.

"Perhaps some day you will let me tell you the whole story. You will not think so hardly of me then," he said.

"I do not think hardly of you now." He thought her face reminded him of one of Murillo's Madonnas hanging in the gallery of his southern home. "Yes, some day you shall tell me all about it. After all it was a crime *passionnel*, and I am a woman of the world, and understand," she said, laying her long

white hand, with its sparkling diamonds, over his for a second.

"It is no secret, you know," he added in his slow voice that always seemed to have a touch of hopelessness and helplessness in it. "It's quite an old story in our country. My people managed to get me out of it, however."

"You will come and see me again," said Mrs. Packinthorp.

"You want me to?" eagerly, turning quickly towards her.

She nodded, smiling frankly.

"Yes, I will. Oh, but you have given me hope. You are my good angel!" He kissed her hand impulsively.

Next morning, as she lazily turned over her letters and sat by the fire enjoying her early morning chocolate, with that enjoyment which only buoyant health can give at breakfast time, she found a note among them. It was short and hurriedly written. She turned to the signature, "Ignace de Rigos," and then read it with interest. "I am going away, but I shall return in a few days. I cannot summon up the courage to see you again just yet, after yesterday. Yet somehow I feel that I shall be welcome when I return. Until then, with all my most heartful thanks, au revoir."

He would have been surprised indeed had he seen the reception of his note. Mrs. Packinthorp laughed. "What a charming little note!" she exclaimed aloud. "Just the right tone for the situation. Yes, I think I must welcome him on his return. Anyway, it's well worth stopping on for. Thank Heaven, I won that money at Monte. I needn't worry in the least about the wretched bill," she said complacently, looking round at the charming sitting-room. With a few touches in the way of satin cushions, masses of flowers, and pieces of dull gold-worked satin Japanese embroidery thrown carelessly over the

lounge and armchairs, she had now quite made it her own.

Three days later, as Mrs. Packinthorp was dressing for a smart dinner given at the Carlton that night, a magnificent bouquet of pale yellow roses was brought her with a note—

"I have returned. Accept these flowers if I am welcome.—IGNACE DE RIGOS."

"How beautiful!" exclaimed Mrs. Packinthorp, looking at the flowers and thinking of the note.

That rose dinner and dance were an unqualified success. Everything was a triumph of taste and luxury. Thousands of yellow roses covered the walls and ceilings. The papers had duly chronicled it, saying that the cotillon presents were worth a king's ransom, so an enormous crowd had gathered outside to watch the guests arrive. A famous divine had preached against the waste and extravagance, and nothing was wanting to make it the *clou* of the winter season.

And yet Mrs. Packinthorp left early. She had seen De Rigos watching her as she walked across the hall on her way to dinner, and she expected to have a word or two with him that night. She was right in her surmise.

As she was slowly making her way along the corridor in her sheath-like yellow gown, with the trail of roses encircling her from shoulders to hem, a voice exclaimed quietly, "How beautiful you look!"

Mrs. Packinthorp started, although she had seen him coming.

"Oh, you frightening person," she said, laughing. "My thoughts were far away. I had no idea you were anywhere near."

"I have watched for you all the evening," he said, looking at her intently. "You carry my roses! Then I am more than happy!"

"How sweet of you to say that!" she exclaimed

delightedly. "No one ever pays me compliments nowadays. I suppose I'm getting too old."

"It was no compliment. It was real happiness. But you must be tired. I must not detain you now."

"Shall we lunch together to-morrow?" she said, looking at him kindly. "Or stay. Let us go for a walk in the morning. Will you take me to the City? I never go there. One gets so tired of the park. Let us go and see the old churches, and museums, and things. Come at eleven," she said gaily, as she wished him good-night, and went up to her rooms.

The next day punctually at eleven, Count de Rigos called and was announced. He found Mrs. Packinthorp already dressed in a simple tailor-made gown and close-fitting little astrakhan cap.

"How delightfully punctual!" She seemed overflowing with gaiety and friendliness to-day. "Where shall we go? Suppose we get on a bus and pretend we are American tourists and go to St. Paul's."

De Rigos acquiesced gladly. He had been about London very little, and Mrs. Packinthorp would be a most vivacious guide. Everything seemed to interest her; the people in the streets, the motor-omnibus upon whose heights they climbed, the buildings they were passing. She was so extraordinarily different from the society women he knew. Her opinions were so bright and reliable, her nature so frank and charming.

"Do you know I have never met a woman like you," he said, as they walked down the beautiful nave of St. Paul's.

"How nice of you!" she said softly.

"I wish you and I could always go about like this, and I wish I felt worthy of all your goodness."

"Now you're getting sad again. What shall I do with you?" she answered with a charming little puzzled air.

They wandered about for some time, and then out through the Churchyard and into Cheapside,

among the rush of clerks, and business men, and typewriting girls, and office boys, all jostling each other in their race for their favourite luncheon place. They looked into the windows. The tie-shops fascinated De Rigos with their wealth of wares at wonderfully cheap prices. Mrs. Packinthorp insisted on their going in here and there to buy things, and together they laughingly chose a multitude of objects and ordered them to be sent to the Carlton. Through the Guildhall they wandered, and then an idea seized Mrs. Packinthorp.

"I will take you to an A.B.C.," she said, "and we will have a simple lunch."

That idea of hers was a brilliant success.

"It's so nice that you like these simple pleasures," he said. "It makes me understand you better. Somehow, I didn't think that night when I first saw you that you could be interested in the small things of life. I saw in your eyes only that you knew the higher things."

"It is the simple things which are the greatest," said Mrs. Packinthorp with a touch of sadness.

She had not the least idea what he meant by the higher things, but the tone of her voice was admirable as she looked at him candidly.

"You are right as you always are," he answered with his eyes fixed upon her.

Then at Mrs. Packinthorp's suggestion they took a cab home. . . . They drove almost in silence. . . . De Rigos felt no need for words with this dear sympathetic woman.

Mrs. Packinthorp did not ask many visitors to the hotel that week, although she went out a great deal. De Rigos had begged her to dine with him whenever she was not engaged, and they went to theatres and concerts together. The latter bored her rather. She was no lover of music. De Rigos, on the contrary, loved the beautiful in everything—pictures, statuary, flowers, music, life. Mrs. Packinthorp cared for the

luxurious and costly. That was the difference between them. But she cleverly hid her yawns at the "Three Fates" and "Demeter and Persephone" in the British Museum, and smiled her way past the treasures of the National Gallery. The Hogarth caricatures she said she could not look at on the same day as the Turners and Titians. "It is sacrilege!" she exclaimed. And De Rigos looked at her with an admiration he no longer took pains to conceal.

A week went by in this halcyon way.

Then came Mrs Packinthorp's next move.

Quite casually one morning she mentioned that she must return to Paris now, as she had business matters connected with property there.

The look on De Rigos' face filled her with the keenest pleasure.

"It is such a nuisance!" she said. "My lawyers over there wish me to go, and I do not see how I can avoid it."

She changed the subject.

"Will you take me out for the afternoon and amuse me?" she cried gaily. "Let us start out on foot and wander, and wherever we get we will enjoy ourselves. I am a little sad to-day, for a wonder," she added, looking at him with a pathetic look in her great dark eyes.

He needed no second asking. He was ready enough to do anything for her. This woman, with her soft, caressing voice, and the beautiful hands which she sometimes laid upon his arm for a moment in sympathy, was rapidly becoming a necessity to him. Life without her would be almost unbearable. And she was going away!

They walked up Regent-street and then turned down along Oxford-street, and visited the glittering Christmas bazaars in the great shops. The ingenious and beautiful toys fascinated and delighted them.

"I must buy some for my little godchild," said Mrs. Packinthorp. "How sweet those great bears

are! And these lovely, lovely clockwork dolls! How she will love them! I adore children," she added, and she ordered the toys to be sent off to the hotel.

She did not add, of course, that the little child to whom she was playing fairy godmother existed only in her imagination.

"The toys can go to some hospital," she thought. "I suppose they always want them there."

The Mexican watched her with admiring eyes as she talked to the girl who was wrapping up the things.

"I am so sorry to be such a nuisance," she was saying sweetly as she changed something.

"Kind and good to every one," he thought. "Ah, if I only had not that hanging over me!"

They wandered out again into Oxford-street, and made their way across Tottenham Court-road, with its seething crowd, into Holborn. They paused a moment to look down the bare, empty space of Kingsway, speculating on the beauties of the avenue when it should be finished. Everything interested them. Because—was it?—each was so tremendously interested in the other.

As they were crossing the road near the top of Chancery-lane the clang of a fire-engine bell broke upon them.

The crowd of omnibuses and waggons turned quickly to one side to make way for the headlong flight of the motor engines.

Mrs. Packinthorp and her companion were in the middle of the road at that moment. They made a dash and were separated by a hansom whose terrified horse, rearing and swerving at the sound of the fire-engine, narrowly missed De Rigos with its hoofs as it pawed the air madly.

The cab rocked, swayed, and fell. Quick as lightning Mrs. Packinthorp had darted to De Rigos and, thrusting her arm through his, dragged him wildly aside. A moment later and the cab might have fallen on him.

In silence they crossed to the pavement. Mrs. Packinthorp was white, but otherwise perfectly calm and collected. But De Rigos was trembling.

"Come," he said. "I'll get you a little brandy or something."

"No, no," she replied quickly, "I'm not hurt. I'm quite all right. Let us walk down this quiet little turning out of the way of the crowd."

It was De Rigos who was the more upset of the two.

"You saved my life," he said.

He spoke with difficulty.

Mrs. Packinthorp had quite regained her composure, and was watching him intently, but with a look of sympathy in her expression.

"Let's go into this church and have a little rest," Mrs. Packinthorp said suddenly.

They turned off Holborn and entered a tall, red-brick building in a little side street. Its half lights and dreamy atmosphere instantly told on the Mexican.

Mrs. Packinthorp watched and waited for some moments. She knew there were tears in his eyes. She waited patiently till they had disappeared, and he had regained his self-control.

Then she spoke to him as if to a child.

"Let us go out into the air now. It will do us both good."

So they strolled out again into the little tiled courtyard, with its high walls and a few bare black trees silhouetted like etchings against the blue-grey sky.

An infinite peace seemed to brood over this out-of-the-way corner that had about it some quality not of London at all, but of some little Florentine church tucked away in a *vicolo*, as though its beauties were too fine to be called attention to.

"Oh, look at this exquisite thing!" said De Rigos, returning to his natural manner, and standing before a copy of a Della Robbia Madonna and Child, surrounded with the inevitable wreath of oranges and green leaves. "Some one with taste has placed this

in the little high-walled yard, and sheltered it with a tiny roof, in Italian style."

"Beautiful," said Mrs Packinthorp, who secretly considered it hideous.

"And those little trees, too, on either side," continued de Rigos. "Fancy finding beauty like this in such a corner of London! Let us stay here for a few minutes. Do."

They strolled up and down under the bare trees of the courtyard for some moments in silence. An intense quiet pervaded the spot. They might have been thousands of miles away from everywhere. Yet two minutes' walk would bring them into the heart of London.

At last Mrs Packinthorp said quietly, "I am so sorry to think this will be our last afternoon together in London. I have enjoyed things so much."

"Our last afternoon!"

He repeated the words dully. They sounded like a death-knell in his ear. Surely fate was not going to be so cruel as that. Was this wonderful woman going away from him, out of his life altogether?

"I suppose you will be stopping on in London," said Mrs Packinthorp.

"No," said De Rigos firmly.

"Where are you going?"

"I do not know."

"You have not made any plans?"

"I have," he said.

A sudden resolution was overmastering him.

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Packinthorp.

"You will know in time."

"I—shall—know—in—time!"

Her voice was strained with horror.

Was he—was he going to kill himself, as well as—that other? "I shall know," she repeated mechanically.

"Yes, for I am going to marry you," he said in his most nonchalant manner, just as he had said the other day: "I killed her."

CHAPTER XXII

PARIS was watching with deepest interest the progress of the Fleur airship.

The recent trials had succeeded almost beyond all hopes, and if the invention kept up its first record, or bettered it, as it seemed likely to do, then France would stand foremost among nations in aerial navigation. The latest successes of this wonderful machine had attracted enormous attention, and Marcel Fleur was now as well known a figure as the President himself. His name was one to conjure with in the music-hall *revues*. His face and figure, hideously and cleverly caricatured on picture post-cards, were in every window. His striking features and curious personality combined to make him dear to the Parisians' hearts. In fact, he was a personage.

Marcel hated publicity, although it touched his vanity greatly. It was dangerous. It made him and his doings too public. His house was well known. The journalists had wormed out of the chattering *concierge* nearly every detail of his private life, and he feared what next they might discover.

Old Ivan, walking feebly along Rue St. Antoine one afternoon, for he was still very weak after his last illness, stopped and bought a newspaper from the good-natured old lady who kept the *kiosk* round the corner of the street. She smiled at him "A la bonne heure, Monsieur Ivan. Ca va mieux, alors. And you haven't flown away in the airship of the great Monsieur Fleur?" pointing to the illustration on the front page.

Ivan nodded. He was in no mood for talking, and her words had touched him in his most sensitive spot, uncalculated though they were.

"The airship of Monsieur Fleur!" The words struck chill on his heart. He turned away and made his way down the Boulevard St. Germain. A pathetic figure he made as he trudged along the pavement, supporting himself on a crooked stick. With his old bent back and fair head crowned by a fur cap, from which his long white hair escaped, he looked quaint and remarkable, even in that quarter of Paris, where there are so many quaint and remarkable characters seen.

The words kept resounding dully in his brain like the beat of sledge hammers, over and over again, round and round, driving him almost to madness. He was no longer completely master of his mind. The illness had weakened his fine intellect, as well as his body. Only in so far as the actual details of his invention went was his mind still intact. In these the master brain asserted itself and held its own.

A dull sense of some great wrong kept ringing in his thoughts that day, which he could not quite grasp, and there was something he was not to do. They had told him not to do it. What was it? drummed out the noises in his head. He wandered on unseeingly, muttering to himself in his native tongue, up the Boulevard, towards the Jardins du Luxembourg.

Turning down a little side street, he was passing one of the little *cafés* so typical of that Quartier, when a voice hailed him.

"Ivan! Ivan!" He looked round, and there was Sergius Krikoffsky, the singer.

The sudden interruption to his train of thought and the well-known face cleared the dull brain instantly.

"Oh, Sergius Krikoffsky, I am glad to see you!" he exclaimed. "How long is it since we met? But,

indeed, I read of you in the papers, of your singing here in Paris, and of your success, and it made me so happy. I was going to write to you and ask you to meet your poor old friend somewhere, but I have been so ill, and I can't remember things as I used to do."

"I did not know, my friend, that you were in Paris," said Sergius, laying his hand affectionately on his arm, "nor that you had been ill."

They entered the *café* and ordered absinthes. For some time they talked on over their long white-lined glasses. There was so much to tell after all these years.

"I am glad to know that you are happy and prosperous," said Krikoffsky at last. "Where are you living?"

Ivan was getting tired, and that dull feeling was coming over his brain again. Krikoffsky's voice was beginning to sound distant and far away. "I live with Marcel Fleur, the aeronaut," he replied slowly.

"With Marcel Fleur! *Mais que faites vous dans cette galère?*" cried the singer with interest. "Oh, but I see! Of course you and he have met, you are both of you inventors. You have both that wonderful gift of invention."

"Invention! invention!" muttered Ivan, with contempt.

His brain was going round again.

"Ha, ha," he laughed softly and mysteriously. "Who has ever seen our Monsieur Fleur invent anything? Clever at figures? Yes, yes, but the——"

"What?" asked Krikoffsky, looking at him with interest.

He mumbled on at last.

"The brain! Ah, the brain. That is old Ivan's. He knew—he knew——"

Krikoffsky did not speak, but leaning forward in amazement waited for him to continue.

The hammers were beginning their work again.

"Ivan knew how to solve the problem, and——"

He stopped his muttering and sat silent and troubled, looking straight before him. His thoughts had flown back to the question that had been worrying him an hour before when he bought his paper. Why did everything go round and round in his brain so? It never used to! What was it?

Ah, yes, there was something he must not tell. . . . That was it. . . . He would go. . . . You could always trust old Ivan. . . . He would never tell. . . . No, no, old Ivan would never tell. . . .

He rose slowly and without a word went straight out of the *café*.

Sergius Krikoffsky stared after him in amazement.

A journalist attached to a great Paris paper came over to his table just then and greeted him. They talked on various topics. Last night's new play at the Odéon and a new opera at the Opéra Comique having been stripped bare of any merit or anything they might have to recommend them, and the *mise-en-scène* having been proportionately praised, the conversation turned on the development of the latest murder case, and it was decided, as is usual in all Paris mysteries, that the old woman who was murdered in her château at St. Germain, having stolen her own jewels, was done away with for political reasons.

But Krikoffsky's thoughts kept wandering.

He could not get Ivan out of his mind.

"You look worried, my friend," said Armand Roche, after a while. "But, then, that's not surprising. *La vie! c'est l'ennui!* Above all for a journalist, when nothing happens. Tell me, who was the old man with the fur cap talking to you? Had he dropped from the North Pole? He seemed to be telling you something pretty exciting—to himself, anyway."

"He was," answered Krikoffsky, slowly.

His instinct had scented some mystery and caught at the hint of injustice Ivan's talk had suggested.

What was it all about?

Did Ivan really mean to imply that he had been the inventor of the airship? And that his was the inventor's genius that had given the Fleur airship to the world?

To a man of Krikoffsky's artistic temperament injustice was unbearable. It was a crime. And Ivan was obviously suffering.

"Tell me," he said suddenly to Armand Roche, "what do you know about Marcel Fleur? Is he clever? What do people say of him? He invented that airship, didn't he?"

Armand Roche was sharp as a needle in his impressionism.

In a second his enthusiasm for copy was aroused. He was sure that old man had been telling Krikoffsky something *à propos* of Fleur.

"Marcel Fleur," he said slowly, looking a little preoccupied. "Oh, yes, he is clever all right, there is no doubt of that. As for inventing the airship, naturally he did. At least, one never knows, of course! I have heard things." He stopped absent-mindedly for a moment. "But how can one tell? Every one looks after himself in this world, and Fleur has got the airship."

Krikoffsky listened intently.

Then there was really something in this fancy of his. People did suspect something. Some people, at all events. Those in the know anyway, perhaps. He leaned forward eagerly.

"Listen," he said, "What do you think of this?"

In a few sentences he described old Ivan's words and his curious manner and abrupt departure.

Armand Roche was beside himself with delight.

He had instantly scented a huge and splendid scandal.

Here was copy fallen from the skies. He would follow it up and ferret it out to the bitter end. What a prize for the paper!

He showed none of those thoughts in his face. He only turned laughingly to Krikoffsky, and said: "Ah, *tout ca c'est de la folie!* Don't believe it. There is nothing in it, my friend."

The two men separated presently, and went their different ways.

Armand Roche wandered across to the Quai du Louvre, and thence made his way slowly up the Avenue de l'Opéra, busy and alive as usual with its mass of traffic and its multitude of pedestrians, some hurrying, others leisurely examining the gorgeous shops. His mind was busy, too, as he walked along. His observant eye was taking in every detail of the passing throng; the tourists with their Baedekers who stood at the street corners in little knots, vainly searching for some building which was the other side of Paris; the blue-veiled, pretty American women whose penetrating accent startled the ever polite policeman as they asked him, "Say now, voulez-vous dire, where is the Louvre?" the English paterfamilias looking bored and cross at being taken to picture galleries and made to admire things he would scorn to look at at home! All this Armand Roche half saw with his amused and observant eye. But the thing he had in his mind was far more important, and he smiled as he went his way.

He was wondering what that talk with Krikoffsky might represent to him in money very soon.

CHAPTER XXIII

IT was no wonder that Marcel should be upset at the rumours that he was getting secret assistance with his inventions. The eyes of Europe were upon him.

The success of the Fleur ornithoptère was assured. This machine was different in its type from any hitherto designed by even the most ingenious students of aeronautics. Marcel had, at a bound, achieved greater results than either Count Zeppelin or the mysterious Wright brothers, and his great flying machine undoubtedly marked an epoch. The method of commencing the flight might eventually be improved upon, but the use of the light motor, which, by the combined action of electrical force and the radio-active energy stored up in the materials of its construction, so far distanced all previous inventions, was a great factor towards success. Even the latest inspiration of other famous men fell far short of the possibilities of this invention of Marcel's.

But greater far was the automatic controlling apparatus. In the application of that supreme device lay the surety of all safety and success. The American brothers, hitherto the most successful, had through many years of slow and careful experimentation demonstrated that it was the man and not the machine that counted most in coping with the varying conditions prevailing in the troubled and unstable aerial sea. But through Ivan's genius the uncertain "personal equation" could be disregarded; or, at any rate, reduced to the minimum. This automatic controlling instrument would be relied on

under all circumstances, and would be applied to any species of contrivance for the navigation of the skies.

And yet, successful as the various flights had been, and immense as seemed the ultimate possibilities of the ingenious bird-machine, Marcel was not satisfied. It had pleased his imagination and gratified his *amour-propre* to have brought this dream to materialisation. But now there came the question of the stern realities of things. In what way was the invention related to the necessities of the age? It could not be denied that so far, great as the success had been, there was a tremendous expenditure of energy from the motor compared with the result attained, and the sources of pitch-blende and its few and rare congeners are not capable of infinite exploitation.

"Strange indeed," thought Marcel to himself, one day, while dreaming over the chances of recruiting these forces, "strange, indeed, that the idea of Poland should come so continually into connection with this invention! The fair land of Poland is represented in the Promethean inventor, in the tutelary goddess Theodora, and in the very material substance which is so potent a factor in its construction." For, as every schoolboy knows, Polonium is one of the radio-active elements, and its very name had acted as a magnet to Marcel's experimental tendencies.

But the ornithoptère seemed impossible as a practical invention. Well enough to demonstrate the power of such a machine to imitate a natural flight. Yet the conjunction of other methods would help the more immediate applications of the intensive motor and the automatic control.

Marcel had, of course, made a deep and continuous study of all the different schemes of aeronautics, and though, up to this time, the question of solving the means of flight by a bird-like construction had absorbed all his imaginative faculties, yet he had always kept within his view the schemes of aviation

as from time to time they came before the notice of those interested in such matters.

Finally he decided to unite ideas and to use the combined types of aeroplane and dirigible balloon. And instead of the wing-like mode of propulsion which is hardly applicable to the aeroplane type, he adopted the idea of the "vertical lifting screw."

He knew that the great defect in the aeroplane is that it must travel at high speed to maintain its position in the air. The helicoptère can keep aloft without horizontal motion, and has also a greater lifting force per h.p., while a far less bulky apparatus need be used, and the gas envelope would ensure a constant modicum of buoyancy.

The syndicate, of course, wished to sell this invention at the highest price. The German Government, when sounded, confessed that they were perfectly satisfied with the results obtained by Zeppelin and Parseval.

Then, carefully and with much misgiving of mind, George had approached the British War Office. But he approached the unapproachable.

"Sir," wrote one, who, after much delay, deigned to hold communication with a person who did not belong to that mandarin class to whom the future destinies of England are entrusted, "I am instructed to say that the military authorities have had experts employed in watching the flights of the various airships and aeroplanes, and the impression is that for a long time to come there is nothing to be feared from them."

"You English," said the irritated Marcel to George when he heard of this, "are so self-confident! For centuries you have found yourselves safe in that jewel in the sea. You have developed in that condition of safety. What on earth will move you from your state of self-satisfaction? Since the battle of Sedgemoor you have had no warlike operations within your own borders. You think—some of you,

at any rate—that no one wishes to fight you! Do you forget that the most terrible war of modern times was a civil one? Brother against brother! Father against son! And among an Anglo-Saxon community! And yet you think—some of you—that racial connections will prevent war—that the effect of the repeated adage, 'Blood is thicker than water'—senseless as it appears on analysis—will be continuous. No, *mon Dieu!* The country that has the greatest power of attack will be the best friend to have in case of necessity. After all, the final facts of existence are summed up in the oft-quoted remark of the vagabond to the magistrate, '*Il faut vivre!*'"

George could not but agree. The attitude of his country had troubled him considerably.

"Our experts," he said, "think there is nothing to be feared for a long time to come from aerial menace. There is nothing, they say, to be feared or expected from a type of machine which within a year has expanded its power of flight from one to fifty-six miles! That is the advance which has been attained by Wright's aeroplane during that short period. How can one take their observations and efforts in serious guise when one compares the hopeless failure of England's dirigibles with the success of the German or French models? But, indeed, when one considers that the governors of our most wealthy country think that £13,000 a year is enough to spend on this enterprise, and seem to overlook the fact that years of training are required to gain the skill necessary for successful construction and manipulation, it 'gives one furiously to think' whether in the next instance we English may be able to 'muddle through' as successfully as under previous occasions of stress."

It said much for the strength and saneness of George's character that he was able to keep in the background just now all that bitterness and rancour that attacked his heart, and to maintain calm and

unbiased and dignified relations with Marcel over the airship affairs.

It was then necessary to apply these inventions to the possibilities of the occasion. Germany refused them. England would not admit their use or necessity. The French Government had, of course, kept a constant watch on all these developments, but of course would not allow any machine on the ornithoptère principle—no matter how successful it seemed—to be submitted to the nation. "No," said the experts, "this is a very wonderful and successful toy, but if it fails in practice it will only bring us ridicule!" And no Frenchman can stand ridicule!

The end of it was that Marcel had been obliged to swallow his pride and combine ideas. His new invention was to have a many-chambered "gas envelope," of a strength and elasticity so far unknown. The fabric was to be of the greatest strength and lightness, and the compartments numerous and absolutely gas-tight. This was to give buoyancy, and save so far as possible the propelling mechanism, and avoid the risk of immediate injury from projectiles below the balloon. The aeroplane was constructed on lines following in many ways those of "the brothers," but with the automatic device which saved the aeronaut from the necessity of the continuous personal care which those original inventors had found necessary.

Marcel's little electro-radio-motor would be perfectly safe under a gas envelope, and there would be none of the risks inherent to the gasolene or petrol motor which was used in all the latest inventions. Then, in addition to this motor, and to the gyroscopes which he had found so efficient in completing the balancing and steering managements, he now brought into play the principle of vertical lifting screws—in fact, the final machine became a combination of dirigible balloon and aeroplane and helicoptère.

The first voyage of the new airship was a

memorable one. Sir George Allingham, Jabez Craigs, and Marcel himself started from Melun to cross the Channel.

"We are going to attempt a flight across 'la Manche,'" said Marcel, to a reporter, "to make a *détour* round London, and then return this evening. It is rather an adventure, but I think we can manage it. Our accumulator is charged for twelve hours at the weight we are carrying, and we should do it in ten."

Quickly they rose above all the house-tops, above the chimneys, the poplars and the church spires. So quickly did they move in mid-air that in a few minutes the station was left behind in the dim distance.

The day was perfect. All the atmospheric conditions were congenial to experiments of this sort. An even, soft, westerly breeze helped Marcel's endeavours. In a few minutes the domes and towers of Paris came into view, and soon afterwards the great airship quietly sailed over the Isle du Palais, and then onward over the heights of Montmartre to the northern suburbs.

The wind veered round more to the north soon after the environs had been passed.

"When birds, such as carrier pigeons, find the wind force too great," said Marcel, "they always seek a lower plane of flight. You will then see the homing pigeon skimming along a few feet or so above the ground. We will imitate the pigeon—for safety."

The perfectly controlled mechanism enabled the captain of the ship to move up and down at his pleasure, and though the occupants of the car seemed at times to pass unpleasantly near to the summits of churches and high chimneys, nevertheless the airship went steadily on its way, and as the sun's rays became stronger its flight became higher.

Now the towers of the cathedral of Rouen could be seen dimly appearing to the south-west, the still rising sun illuminating their gilded pinnacles.

"We are just passing over Dieppe," said Marcel, looking over the edge of the car, "but I am afraid we are separated by cloudland from that most hospitable town. Soon we will cross the silver streak and begin to show Britain the possibility of invasion by means of airships."

George sat still and said nothing. He thought there was a great deal of rodomontade in such suggestions, but all the time he was considering what might be the ultimate effect of a fleet of contrivances such as that on which he was a passenger.

Looking down over the side of the car he could now with difficulty determine the uncertain line of the seashore, marking a separation from the grey-green haze which he recognised as sea.

"We are crossing the Channel," thought he. "Can it ever be possible that such machines as this will cross our dear dividing line with hostile purpose?"

The airship again descended.

Down towards the rushing waters of the English Channel it crept, and quietly pursued its appointed course. Lower and lower was the continued flight.

"The air currents just above us are so strong that it will be hard to resist them or make use of them. We are safe at this low elevation," said Marcel. "But in any case we will be ready to mount upwards or skim downwards as soon as our automatic indicator gives us any sign. Look ahead!" added Marcel. "Do you see the dim outline of the English shore? Those are the white cliffs of your impregnable Albion. We have changed our course, and soon we shall pass over Dover and give a surprise to the golfers and Navy men."

Dover was passed at a high altitude, much to the consternation of some of the members of the Cinque Ports Club, who watched this apparition with dismay.

"Evidently the first of a fleet of destroyers," seemed to be the general opinion among the old boys.

The sun shone brightly as the voyagers passed over the Weald of Kent.

The action of the helicoptère, combined with the greater buoyancy of the balloons, caused the airship to rise rapidly to a height of three thousand feet.

"We shall try to keep this altitude," said Marcel, "until we reach London, and then make a descent. The effect will be more dramatic—and convincing!"

Nearing Croydon, the lifting screws were slowed down, and the airship descended to a height of about five hundred feet.

At this distance from the earth a rapid flight was made over the southern suburbs.

The Thames was crossed at Battersea Park, and the course was then directed to Westminster. At the Houses of Parliament Marcel suggested that a halt should be made.

"No," said George, "the central point is the Bank of England. Let us go that far and show the citizens what possibilities are in view."

The Terrace at Westminster was crowded with members and their friends.

The crowded Strand and Fleet-street were as thick with gazing and gaping denizens as on the occasion of the Lord Mayor's show as the Fleur airship passed quickly over the City boundary, cleared the cross of St. Paul's by a hundred feet or more, and quickly reached the civic centre. It stopped for a minute circling slowly over the Mansion House, and then crossed over to the Bank. Above the Bank the airship again circled quietly and evenly, at the height of about six hundred feet, around the whole circumference of the building, and then was gently wafted towards the centre. When above the middle of the edifice the machine began to descend.

Down, down—at first quickly, and then more slowly—came this threatening monster. The whole City, from alderman to office-boy, was quickly in the streets, wondering what this might portend. The

Lord Mayor was hastily summoned, and a messenger was sent post haste to the Honourable Artillery Company to provide help in emergency. At two hundred feet altitude Marcel brought the arresting and stabilising apparatus to work.

There was now no wind, and it was easy to keep the machine at rest.

"I am going to give them a fright," said Marcel.

"Don't do anything foolish," remonstrated George. "You might cause trouble if you go too far."

"Oh no," said Marcel. "I think you will find the *dénouement* satisfactory."

He stooped, and took up two rounded objects, which he held out to the view of the crowed city. A cry! A yell of anger and terror went up. The citizens expected bombs—dynamite, if not worse—on the head of the "Old Lady of Threadneedle-street."

Marcel grinned maliciously at George, who looked half uncertain as to the result.

He then attached the two rounded objects to ropes, and quickly ran them up to the level of the balloon, where they unfolded themselves as the flags of the two nations—the Tricolour and the Union Jack. The crowd was quick to see the meaning, and a great "Hurrah" came hurtling upwards at this novel and picturesque demonstration of *l'entente cordiale*.

That night there was a grand dinner in Paris, of which Marcel was the honoured guest and hero, and ere midnight Sir George Allingham and the Syndicate had the supreme satisfaction of knowing that the French Government were about to make the most munificent offer of modern times for any invention yet known to man, for a new airship designed more or less on the lines of the one that had that day made the famous flight from Paris to London and back again.

CHAPTER XXIV

It was a strange irony of fate that the two idols of Paris that winter should be the man and woman whose mere existence seemed to cast danger and pain in the paths of each other—Marcel Fleur and the lovely Lady Allingham.

Theodora, through no desire of her own, had gradually been talked and paragraphed by Paris into the position of professional beauty. Her photographs were in all the shops and society journals. Wherever she went she was recognised. Her patronage and her name were asked by milliners and dressmakers for their hats and gowns. Her presence was needed at every social function in order to ensure its complete success and brilliancy. And, as often happens in such cases, with its growing reputation her beauty seemed to have miraculously developed and increased. People said of her, "She's lovelier than ever!" And it was true. For there had come into her expression what is lacking so often in the face of a great beauty —depth and tenderness and a note of sadness that intensified her charm. Beautiful eyes of a perfect shape and exquisite colouring, but with no meaning in them, are common enough. The violet eyes of Lady Allingham were full of feeling as well as brightness.

For, in spite of her sadness, she was bright enough. George, watching her sometimes secretly, told himself that he had never seen her so gay and light-hearted as she was in these days, revelling in the wit and repartee of her delightful Parisian circle, and saying good things among people who possess so

absolutely the art of saying things well that any one else finds it difficult indeed to shine there. Yet Theodora shone. Her wit went home and delighted the Parisians; and, encouraged by their delight and admiration, she rapidly developed into a more brilliant as well as beautiful woman.

At the same time there was Marcel Fleur, crowning it in his own way over the heart of Paris. He was strange, eccentric, and inordinately clever, and Paris believed in him. People ran after him in the streets to look at him, and wherever he went there was a murmur, "M. Fleur."

They ought to have been the two happiest people in the city.

Instead, they considered themselves the most miserable.

Theodora knew very well that George disliked the violent public admiration her beauty had excited. For herself, she would have done anything she could to get rid of this distasteful publicity, but she found it impossible. Paris had decreed that she must have her day, and she was having it.

"A man who marries a great beauty should beware," said George to himself one day, cynically, as he came upon Theodora's photograph in a bookshop alongside that of Marcel Fleur.

A pang of fierce jealousy attacked him for the moment.

But what was the use?

It was better to be sensible. To keep one's head was certainly always the wisest course, and he forced himself to look at the two photographs calmly for several moments before he strolled leisurely away.

It was not an easy thing to do.

In fact, every day George said to himself that life was no easy matter.

Theodora was alone in her boudoir that same afternoon when George had seen her photograph with Marcel's, and in the paper that she was reading was

a glowing account of Marcel Fleur's famous voyage to London.

Her feeling of pleasure was inevitable as she read, but it suddenly came to an abrupt end. Marcel Fleur himself was coming into the room.

She flushed with anger and sprang to her feet. On his last visit here she so emphatically forbade him ever to come again that she was astounded at his audacity.

But whatever she was going to say died away on her lips. His face was ghastly and his hands were trembling. She saw at once that he was in the grip of some overmastering emotion.

"*Ivan has disappeared!*" he gasped.

"What!"

"He has gone—he is completely lost. For three days I have not seen him."

He was looking at her wild-eyed, imploringly, as if he expected her to help him.

"Calm yourself—calm yourself," she said quickly. "Tell me about it. How do you mean—he has disappeared?"

"*Mon Dieu!* And you take it like that," he burst forth, "quietly and calmly, when you know what it means to me?"

"I really fail to see what good it would do you if I became mad like you," Theodora replied coldly. "It is lucky for you that people keep their heads sometimes. Now tell me when you saw him last."

"Three days ago—at eight o'clock in the morning. He went out to buy some milk and some journals—he never returned; all that day I was very busy, and I scarcely gave him a thought. It happened that I did not want him, and I had no time really to wonder where he was or what he was doing. But when night came, and he did not turn up, I began to be uneasy. I stopped up all night, but he never appeared. All next day I hung about waiting for him and looking for him in all his little haunts where I know he had

been wont to go for drinks or tobacco—no sign of him anywhere. I dare not ask too many questions. I did the best I could, but in vain. Not a trace of him could I find, and just this afternoon I have discovered that he has taken away his bag and most of his clothes."

Theodora uttered an exclamation.

"Ah, now you are roused!" cried Marcel, fiercely. "You see at last the possible significance of that. *Mon Dieu!*" he burst forth; "what on earth am I going to do? Something must be done. He has got to be found—he must be found. The French Government are hurrying me now over my new airship, and time is short. I have signed a contract with them already to produce it at a certain time. And with all this competition on the Continent, every hour is of importance, and——"

He stopped dead and stared at her with those wild eyes of his.

"And you cannot go on," she finished for him. "Is that it?"

But she knew as she spoke that it was more than that. She realised to the full what Ivan's disappearance meant to Marcel. It not only deprived him of that talented man, with his extraordinary capacity for solving problems, but it placed him also at the mercy of a great fear.

Ivan might be telling all, giving away his master wholesale in little drinking taverns, his brain on fire with absinthe, and the strings of his tongue loosed. Theodora saw this as plainly as Marcel.

"Cannot you go to the police?" she said.

"I dare not," said Marcel.

Before he had time to answer, George came in with the Duc d'Ailes.

Marcel scarcely took any notice of the newcomers, but paced up and down the room for several moments like a wild beast.

"What on earth is the matter with you?" asked

the Duke, after he had watched in silence for some time. "This exhibition is extraordinary, *n'est-ce pas?*"

George had watched it too, but he made no remark.

"What exhibition?" asked Marcel, coming to a standstill. "I never go to exhibitions."

"Really, my dear friend, you do not need to," said the Duke, cheerfully.

With all his respect for Marcel's genius, he was no lover of this young, uncouth being who treated a lady's boudoir as if it were an animal's den.

"A mannerless cub," he called Marcel, and often wondered how George put up with him.

Marcel seized his hat, bowed quickly, and unceremoniously disappeared. He found it impossible to stay there in that quiet atmosphere, with his brain in this state of wild turmoil. He must do something —action, action, that was what he needed. He must find Ivan.

The cold air revived him, and a touch of snow in his face had a sobering effect on his fevered pulses.

His thoughts became clearer.

After all, why should not he go to the police and lay the case before them? That could not in any way increase the danger. As he was thinking this some one saluted him, and he saw beside him an acquaintance of his in the private police force.

"The very man," he said to himself. He seized this newcomer—Louis Chacot—by the arm excitedly, and poured out a rapid, somewhat unintelligible stream of questions.

"What do you do in the case of any one being lost—a man or a woman, for instance—how do you act?"

"That wholly depends, my friend," said Louis Chacot, "in what way they are lost. Have they lost themselves? Have they been lost? Do they know they are lost?"

Marcel stared blankly at him.

"Or have they been kidnapped?" continued Chacot.

"Kidnapped! But he is an old man."

"Still, he might be kidnapped for a purpose," said Chacot; "that, I assure you, is the commonest reason for disappearance."

"But why—what object?" exclaimed Marcel. "Why should they kidnap him?"

"To get something out of him," Chacot replied.

"He has no money—he is poor," said Marcel.

"Then perhaps he knows something," said Chacot. "Perhaps he knows something," he repeated meaningly. "When people know things they are invaluable. In my experience I have never known any one kidnapped yet who had not much money or else—*knew* something."

Mon Dieu! If they make him talk! Could that be it? Had some one got hold of him and taken him away and were they dragging the whole thing out of him? His excited fancy saw a picture of Ivan with a glass of absinthe in front of him—talking—talking——

Chacot interrupted him.

"Have you seen this?" he said. He drew a paper from his pocket, and, looking through it carefully, found the paragraph he required. He laid his finger upon it and showed it to Marcel.

It seemed to the inventor as he read that paragraph that the skies dropped and the foundations of the earth trembled under his feet.

"To be a genius is great luck. Who would be foolish enough to deny it? Is it not what we all want—we clever ones? Yet it is denied us. The fates insist that we shall stop at being merely clever. But there is such a thing as genius. There is a man who succeeds. For instance, our young, brilliant, popular idol—M. Marcel Fleur. Everything he attempts thrives. Failure passes him by. The eyes

of Europe are fixed upon him, and Paris has given her heart as well as her intellectual reverence. It is probably on account of this adoration and admiration that the brilliant inventor is not altogether exempt from the passing attacks of calumny and spite which are the lot of all great men. He is deaf and blind to it all. He is too great to hear—too great to see. When whispers go circulating about his fame and voices ask spitefully, 'Who helps him with his work? . . . Be sure he doesn't do it all himself,' he is sublimely indifferent, and goes on his course like an emperor or a god."

He handed the paper back to Chacot in silence.

"Very amusing, *n'est-ce pas?* I must be off," he said quietly.

"How about your old man?" asked Chacot.

"Oh, that—that was only imaginary," said Marcel. "If one invents, one must be imaginary. *Au revoir,*" and he went his way quickly, afraid that Chacot would notice his agitation.

Meanwhile a little blue note with portentous words was speeding along its pneumatic course.

Marcel had just entered the laboratory when it arrived. He took it in his shaking hands, and looked wildly at the signature. It was from Mrs. Packinthorp. Whatever did she want, of all the people in the world?

What on earth did this mean? What *could* she have of the utmost importance to tell him? The wording seemed almost threatening! How absurd! It was his ridiculous nerves, overstrained by this trouble about Ivan, and that horrible paragraph that Louis Chacot had showed him.

He threw the note aside angrily.

He would not go!

For a few moments he sat thinking. "Something of the utmost importance (to you)." The words repeated themselves over and over again in his brain.

Perhaps after all he had better go. Yes, it was stupid, but he would go. Who could tell what this woman might want, or might have done?

Perhaps—perhaps she knew something of Ivan's disappearance, and the horrible truth was that if he did not find Ivan soon he would not be able to go on. The plans of the new airship were ready, thanks to Ivan's assistance, but there were a hundred and one details that Marcel knew he never could successfully cope with if he were to be deprived of Ivan's brain.

He rose quickly, and throwing on his great astrakhan-lined coat with its enormous collar, so well known by the Parisians and all frequenters of the boulevards with their caricatures of him and their postcards, he went out into the street. He hailed an open taximeter-cab as it passed, and, jumping in, was quickly borne away to his destination along the muddy boulevards.

CHAPTER XXV

THE cab jolted along on its way. Marcel was a personage easily recognisable to the crowd, and many were the glances thrown at him as he passed swiftly by. Only once was there a block in the traffic as they went across a crowded street, and as the driver pulled up a *camelot* put his dirty hand on the cab door and cried to his comrades: "Tiens! C'est la Fleur!" One of the others called out, laughing: "Where did you find the secret, m'sieur?"

The words struck Marcel forcibly. Did they mean anything? Was the public mind getting as suspicious as all that? Rumours might have reached even the poor people.

But no—it was probably only a joke, and signified nothing. Everybody knew that he had discovered the secret of the air, and the words did not necessarily mean anything more.

This conscience of his, he told himself, magnified everything. Nevertheless he was glad when the mass of vehicles slowly began to move, and at last they were speeding on their way. In a few minutes they reached the house, and Marcel quickly made his way up to the De Rigos's apartments.

He was shown straight to Countess de Rigos's boudoir, an exquisite room of purple and silver, furnished with only a few pieces, but with an almost barbaric touch. This was the only room that had been altered in the apartment which she and De Rigos had taken over from an American millionaire. She had furnished it herself in shades of purple, deep

mauve, and cream colour; great Oriental cushions lay on the floor by the open fireplace, and in the half-light, with the glow of the ruddy flames upon her, the Countess sat on one of these, picturesquely, looking into the fire as he entered.

She made, as usual, a charming picture, with her eye for theatrical effect. This was a touch she never neglected: often so much depended on lighting and general effects, she told herself, and combined with cleverness and a little luck one could attain almost anything. To-day she was wearing a gown of deep orange colour, shot with purple, which seemed to belong to the room and the firelight, so cleverly had it been chosen.

"*Cher*, Monsieur Fleur! How charming!" she exclaimed, turning towards him with outstretched hands. "I simply can't get up to welcome you. I'm so comfortable down here. Come," she said, holding his hand softly with her white fingers, "do sit down here by the fire on this other cushion, and let us chat and be quite informal. My husband is out. I am so dull. Now tell me all the news. It is so seldom that an ordinary mortal like myself gets a chance to talk to such a celebrated person as the most-talked-of aeronaut of the day, that I must make the most of it."

"You are very kind," he said slowly, leaning his arm on the cushioned rail in front of the fire, and looking at her intently.

"Kind! Oh no, I am not really, at least not in this case, for here am I wasting your time while you might be doing something wonderful in your laboratory, and enjoying yourself, instead of having to put up with my chatter," she said with a touch of coquetry, glancing at him for a moment with a charming smile.

"I assure you," he answered quickly, "I could not be spending my time more profitably. This is rest after my labours."

He looked at her. She certainly was a handsome woman, and clever too. At this moment, the grace and abandon of her pose were particularly charming as she leant against the rail; one white arm, from which the loose sleeve fell back, was extended along the cushioned ledge, the taper fingers almost touching his coat sleeve. A great band of turquoises and diamonds set in dull gold on her wrist caught the glint of the dancing flames.

"How sweet of you to put it like that," she murmured.

Her mind was working quickly, though apparently she was merely gazing lazily into the fire. This might be just a little part of her revenge upon Theodora and her husband. Why should Marcel not transfer his affections to her, at any rate in appearance, for she was by no means certain that even her powers could vanquish such admiration as she knew he had for the beautiful Lady Allingham.

"What are you doing now? Are you making some wonderful new experiments, or have you already done so, and created something even more amazing to astonish us all?" she asked lightly.

Marcel paused a moment before replying. What had she summoned him so peremptorily for? Surely not to talk about airships. He had quickly decided that she did not seem to know anything of Ivan. Her tone was coquettish and flattering, not threatening. "Heavens," he thought suddenly, "the woman has asked me here to begin a flirtation with her. This is amusing, indeed."

"As a matter of fact, experiments have ceased for the moment. I do not mind telling you," he said, playing up to her with a meaning glance, "that I have just completed the plans of the airship for the French Government."

"How very splendid!" exclaimed Countess de Rigos, enthusiastically. "I think you are so wise not to take that stupid pose so many people go in for

who have genius—of being above money matters. Ah! you clever men—what a lot of secrets you must have! What a lot of things there always are behind the scenes which only a few know of."

Carelessly laying her hand on his, she pressed it gently as she spoke the last few words.

Marcel started.

What did that mean? What did she know?

"You see, I am one of the favoured few in this case. It is so charming for an ordinary woman to be let into such a secret—so fascinating," she murmured.

Marcel sat in petrified silence. So she knew about Ivan. And it was for this that she had summoned him. She was going to make her own terms. Doubtless she wanted to use him in some way. He could not speak; for a moment he was incapable almost of thinking.

Meanwhile the Countess was about to proceed in her soft, musical voice along her lying way. She had determined to tell him that her dear Theodora had confided in her, and that she no more loved him at all, and had told her many things (which of course were lies) about him. A plan was rapidly forming in her head wherewith she would make this strange and impressionable man's love turn to hate.

There was a dead silence.

"Like all women," she said, smiling slowly, "I adore secrets, and when I stumbled on yours quite by chance, I admit that I was delighted, and——"

Marcel could stand it no longer. He rose brusquely, and in a voice choking with fear and anger, exclaimed, "Tell me, what do you know? How much do you know? Enough of this beating about the bush. Do you, or do you not, know where Ivan is?"

It was now the turn of the woman crouching by the fire in utter amazement to wonder what the other meant. Ivan! Ivan! Where had she seen that name in connection with his? Ah, the letter! Then

there was something else he was trying to hide. She neither moved nor expressed any emotion, but she was on the alert. Here was something new.

A secret evidently of far more importance than her stupid little one about his infatuation for Theodora was hidden here. She must ferret it out!

"My dear Monsieur Fleur," she said at last calmly, "do not get so excited, I beg you. Let us be calm and talk quietly and reasonably together. I will be quite frank with you and tell you all, and then you will see what a perfectly harmless person I am, and one who only wishes you well." She paused slightly. "You see, a letter came to me by mistake, obviously put into the wrong envelope, and I read it—which, perhaps, I should not have done—but remember," she said, smiling charmingly like some innocent child, "a woman's dreadful curiosity, and be lenient with me. Thinking the note was of importance, I traced the person to whom it was evidently addressed——"

"Theodora," ejaculated Marcel, with a despairing gesture.

"Yes," she replied sweetly. "I have the letter here," she added, rising and taking a sheet of paper from the folds of her gown.

"May I see it? I cannot believe it. It is a lying forgery. Some enemy has been trying to ruin me, and sent it to you on purpose."

He snatched it from her hand quickly. The movement did not appear to surprise her much. In a moment he had glanced at it and torn it into a hundred pieces, throwing them into the blazing fire.

"Dear Monsieur Fleur, how rude!" exclaimed the Countess, sweetly. "I did so want that copy."

"Copy!"

"Yes. You were quite right. That letter was a forgery. I did it. The original is far too valuable to keep lying about the house, so it reposes with other precious papers in my banker's keeping! If you pick up that little piece which is not burnt you

will see that the paper is the same as my own, which is specially made for me. Would you like to try?" she asked, going over to the writing-table.

"You fiend!" he exclaimed furiously. "What do you want for your silence?"

"*Mon cher*, Monsieur Marcel," she replied sweetly, going up to him and holding out her hands, "you have nothing to fear from me. All I want is to be friends. Friends—remember," she repeated. "Now you are a little upset, and quite unnecessarily, believe me. Go home and think things over; when you are calmer you will see that fate has really played you quite a good turn in sending you to me. The secret of Ivan is perfectly, absolutely safe in my hands. Good-bye," she smiled gently, leading him to the door as she clasped his hand.

He went out stumblingly, blindly, overcome with anger and a whirlwind of conflicting thoughts not untouched with fear.

The door had scarcely banged after him as he blundered along the corridor to the entrance, past the manservant watching to show him out, when a smaller door let into the panelling on the other side of the room behind the piano opened and an elderly woman appeared. She was evidently a servant, but there was something in her entrance, despite her air of frightened humility, which gave the idea that she was also a person who was quite sure of her position. She stood there silently, her lean hands folded over one another as the Countess turned to her with an interrogating smile.

"The gentleman seemed in a great state—a great state," said the woman slowly.

She had a peculiar trick of repeating her words, which gave unthinking people the impression that she was foolish, a deduction they sometimes had occasion to repent afterwards.

She was rather under medium height, with lean and hard features; her mouth formed a line across

her lined and wrinkled face, but her humble air covered much of this. She stooped slightly, which made her look older than she really was, and this, combined with her thin, straight grey hair, and lifeless, dull eyes, made up the curious and unpleasant personality of Mrs. Hawkins. The Countess had introduced her into the new household as her old nurse, who had been in the family all her life, and whom she was delighted to shelter in her old age. As a matter of fact, Hawkins had, it is true, been a nurse, but only for a little while, and the Countess had run up against her at Monte Carlo some years back when she was ill, and she (Mrs. Hawkins) had since then been of great use to her in various little ways, for the woman in her way was devoted to her mistress.

The Countess de Rigos smiled on.

"Yes, Hawk, he does seem upset, doesn't he? But we will upset him more, you and I, before we have done—perhaps," she added musingly.

Mrs. Hawkins's thin lips smiled, showing her yellow teeth. She looked a little like some animal when she had that expression on her thin face.

"I dare say," she said grimly.

For a moment the Countess stood silently, watching the dancing flames. "There is much to be done. . . ."

"You can count on me," said Mrs. Hawkins, "if I can be of any use——?" deprecatingly.

"Yes, I think you can," replied the Countess, continuing gaily, "I know that I can count on you for any little acts of villainy I may contemplate. What a comfort you are! I have a great scheme on hand now. I have to pay out a woman who has offended me, and I'm going to do it well and thoroughly."

"I'm sure," murmured the gaunt old woman, her lifeless drab eyes staring dully before her, "I'm with you, dearie."

When she had gone the Countess went to her desk and wrote another note to Marcel Fleur.

"DEAR MONSIEUR FLEUR:—

"Ignace and I will be so delighted if you will come and dine with us quite informally—just ourselves—next Thursday. . . . There are so many things we have in common, so many tastes and opinions; it will be such pleasure to us both if you will come that we are not going to ask any one else, so that we may have you all to ourselves, though, indeed, it's sadly greedy of us to ask such a thing of so busy and run-after a personage. . . . We dine at half-past eight. . . . You must come; in fact, we simply can't take 'no' for an answer."

She laughed as she folded the letter, saying softly to herself, "*The sleeping-draught is the next thing!*"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE pale winter sun shone through the pink silk blinds of the luxurious bedroom as the Countess de Rigos lay back against the pile of silken cushions, sipping her morning chocolate and opening her numerous letters.

She had been very late the night before, and, feeling a little fagged, followed her usual rule of allowing herself to be lazy until her abundant energy returned and she felt a wish to get up. She made quite a charming picture, in spite of her fatigue, as she sat propped up, her raven hair and pale face against the soft pillows. Her maid had thrown an exquisite wrapper of pink silk shot with copper-colour around her shoulders, and she really looked adorable, as her husband had exclaimed when he had come in hurriedly in answer to her summons, fearing that she might be ill. Everything in the room was in harmony with a wonderful scheme of colouring, pink shading into a red golden bronze and cream colour. A huge fire burnt brightly in the grate, for the morning was very cold, and its light danced upon the bronze fittings.

The sun streamed through one of the uncurtained windows, catching a hundred colours in the old copper-framed mirrors with their wonderful designs. Through an open door a glimpse was caught of a superb marble bathroom, where once again the fittings were all of copper. This in its turn gave into the Countess's dressing-room, into which the small door behind the piano in the purple room opened.

"Tell Mrs. Hawkins I want to see her," she said to the maid, dismissing her, and than lay back with closed eyes. When she opened them a few moments later she found the nurse had entered silently and stood watching her.

"Give me some more chocolate, Hawk, there's a dear, and sit down and listen to me," said the Countess, smiling.

Mrs. Hawkins did as she was bid, and then sat waiting with folded hands in perfect silence.

She always looked so respectable, quiet, and uninteresting, not to say foolish, that no one ever glanced at her a second time unless by chance they knew her or ever had dealings with her. Her dull, drab-coloured eyes watched intently the face of the beautiful woman on the luxurious bed with its delicate lace covers.

"I want your help. There is a lot to do, and only you and I can do it," the Countess continued slowly, her low-toned voice rising and falling melodiously, as she softly laid out her plans and suggestions before this silent, listening woman, whose only sign of attention was to rub her bony hands together gently as she noticed some special point. At last the low voice ceased.

"A very good idea—very good idea," said Hawkins. "Old Hawk 'll see you through, dearie," she added quickly, as she made the old motion with her restless hands. It was only when she was deeply interested in something that she dropped her acquired refined accent and returned to the Cockney of her birth and its slang.

"I think that will do, don't you?"

Hawkins nodded silently and sat for a moment in thought. Her mistress watched her. There was no expression on her hard, lined face, with its high cheek-bones and stupid dull eyes, to tell what was passing through her mind, but the Countess waited in patience.

"You shall have it by the time you dress for dinner," Hawkins said at last. "I can carry out all my part easily, only—what will I get out of it?"

"A hundred pounds, and in advance," answered the Countess, quickly.

"A bargain," replied Hawkins.

CHAPTER XXVII

"LET us all go and have coffee in my room," suggested the Countess, rising. "It is so cosy there, and you can talk airships and things to your hearts' content while I strum on the piano and amuse myself."

The two men willingly acquiesced, and they all went into the delightful purple and silver room together. The Count and Marcel sank into two low armchairs by the fire and began to talk lazily. They had both had a long and tiring day, and De Rigos made no pretence of hiding the fact that he felt sleepy. His wife protested laughingly that he was being very rude to their guest and turned to the open piano.

"I will sing you a lullaby," she said gaily. "If you really want to sleep we may as well do the thing in style. Monsieur Fleur, I know, is too polite; he will stay awake and listen."

At that moment a servant entered with a silver salver.

"But I will make you some of the Turkish coffee your souls love, first. My husband," she said, turning towards Marcel, "has taught me the only real and true way to do it, and I look to you for congratulation on the result."

She busied herself at the tray at the door for a few moments, with her back to the two men, intent on their discussion of some aerial experiment.

It was easy work to slip the contents of the phial into two of the delicate little cups with their golden

stands, and shortly after, with a charming smile, she stood awaiting their verdict as they drank it.

"It is delicious," said Marcel, with enthusiasm, draining his cup as she struck a few soft notes on the piano.

"I am so glad you like it," she murmured, casting down her eyes that they should not betray her amusement.

Softly she began to sing a crooning Russian lullaby. As her fingers wandered over the keys after the first verse she looked up.

They were both sleeping soundly!

She rose very quietly and went over to them.

They did not move, and there was silence except for the regular breathing which came from the drugged sleepers.

She touched their hands—they did not move a muscle.

Swiftly she went back to the piano, and noiselessly opened the little door leading to her dressing room.

"Are you there?" she whispered.

"Yes," came the reply, and the form of Mrs. Hawkins appeared dimly in the door way. She had changed her appearance greatly. A plain but rich dress was concealed by the thin and dowdy black cloak she was wearing over it, and beneath her large hat she wore a white wig which, together with the alterations she had made with a little paint and powder, made her look quite a delightful old lady when her thick veil was raised. "Get the keys," she whispered.

The Countess glided across the room, and stooping over Marcel, gently took hold of the chain at the end of which he kept the keys belonging to the laboratory and his rooms.

There were two bunches.

She quickly undid the smaller and put it into the outstretched waiting hand.

The door closed and she glided back to the piano and resumed, very softly, her playing.

Mrs. Hawkins made her way swiftly down the back staircase, taking off her thin cloak in the next street, where she hailed a passing cab and gave the man an address near the laboratory, with injunctions to drive fast.

Meanwhile the Countess played on.

It was a trying ordeal, and, though her nerves were of iron when there was anything she wished to carry out, she felt the strain more and more as the time passed by.

It seemed hours. Every moment she expected the two men to wake up. The clock on the mantelpiece she had stopped at six o'clock that afternoon purposely.

On and on the white, taper fingers moved over the ivory keys.

Suddenly a light tap upon the door at her side sounded. The player did not move. She had full command of herself, strung up as she was. She softly went on playing with her right hand, and pushed open the door with her left.

"Did you succeed?"

"Yes," came the reply in a whisper from the next room.

The Countess glided over to the two motionless figures by the fire. Long and intently she looked at them. Neither moved; their breathing was still even and deep. Mrs. Hawkins continued in a whisper.

"There is lots of time. They ought not to wake for ten minutes yet. Still, hurry! One can never tell! Here are the keys, and—take this, and if they stir give them each three whiffs, no more, mind," added the nurse, handing her through the doorway a little bottle containing chloroform.

She did not come into the room, but watched through the half-open door, her mistress's movements

as she glided again noiselessly towards the two sleeping men.

De Rigos appeared to be wholly unconscious and sleeping peacefully still.

She turned to Marcel.

Gently she drew out the chain with its bunch of keys, and holding ready in her hand the chloroform, she fixed the second bunch on again and slipped them back into his pocket.

As she did so he stirred ever so slightly in his sleep. She had only just been in time, and a cold shiver ran through her as she realised her narrow escape. But the fates seemed to be on her side. A minute later and he would have been roused even by her gentle touch.

Quick as lightning she handed the chloroform back to Mrs. Hawkins.

"Go on playing, dearie," whispered the old woman, "and give a sudden crash to wake 'em up. See you later on."

With that she noiselessly closed the door.

The Countess's fingers glided over the keys. Then a triumphant note sounded loudly through her soothing chords. She was playing more and more forte, but in vain. She could not wake the sleepers. Suddenly she knocked a book on to the keys with a mighty bang.

"What on earth was that?" said the Count, turning drowsily and blinking.

"I'm afraid it was my clumsiness," murmured his wife without looking round. "I let this score of 'Tristan and his beloved Iseulte' fall on to the keys." She added flippantly, "And it is as heavy as the two singers themselves always are! I *am* so sorry! You were asleep, I am sure of it. You were much too quiet to be only listening to my performance. Own up, dear, and apologise to me and to M. Fleur, who I know is much too polite and fond of music—even mine," she laughed.

She knew that the longer she kept talking the better. It gave Marcel time to collect himself. At last he spoke.

"I have been enjoying your music more than I can say," he said; "you played most beautifully. You are one of those lucky people who have that indefinable 'something' in their playing. The Count was dreadfully tired, and your music soothed him. I watched him going off gradually into the land of dreams. And then I listened in silence."

"How dear of you," she answered. "And that is the greatest compliment you could pay me!"

She had listened to his story with a smile of delight.

His easy lying appealed to her greatly, and he thought her look of pleasure arose from the compliments he had paid to her playing, and was not unpleased at the feeling that he had been able to deceive her so very easily. She laughed on brightly and ran her fingers over the keys as she jumped up. She could afford to be generous and let him have his little satisfaction. She held his secret.

"Well, anyway," she exclaimed, going over to her husband and taking his arm fondly, "you were only asleep ten minutes at the most, so what does it matter?"

Marcel lazily drew his watch out to examine the time and see for himself how long De Rigos had slumbered. The hands were at ten. It had stopped! It was ten o'clock when they came in here from dinner.

"My watch has stopped!" he exclaimed. She knew that very well. When she manipulated the keys she also adjusted his watch.

He glanced up at the mantelpiece. The little gold clock there announced, in the shameless manner of little gold empire clocks, that it was now six o'clock.

"Oh! that," cried the Countess, gaily. "Don't take any notice of that. It's never even set right

now. We leave it severely alone, as a punishment for its mad vagaries."

"What time do you make it?" Marcel inquired of De Rigos.

"I? Oh, you have my watch, dear," said the Count to his wife. "I lent it to you, you remember."

"Yes, it was sweet of you," she replied smilingly. "You trusted me with a treasure that I know you really hate to see out of your sight. But then, think of the object."

"What object?" asked Marcel.

"The Turkish coffee," nodded the Countess. "A question of minutes—a question of seconds—makes all the difference to *that!* Really," she added, with a demure little laugh, "I don't believe that Ignace would have trusted me with his watch for any other reason than that."

As she spoke she drew the watch in question from the front of her gown. She bent over it. "It's exactly half-past ten," she said.

Then she looked up brightly at the two men, and smiled on one first and then on the other, adding, in a soothing voice, "So you were only naughty enough to sleep for two minutes! It couldn't have been more."

She turned to De Rigos, and suggested they should play a game called Skerra—the most fascinating game in the whole world—and such a brain rest. "Ignace taught it to me," she told Marcel, "and I—even I—stupid as I am, picked it up quite quickly, so I'm sure you won't have the slightest trouble, M. Fleur, with your great mathematical brain, that is always tackling problems."

As she spoke, almost without seeming to move, she was noiselessly opening a card table, there between the men. She reached back and brought cards from behind her. A box of counters was quickly placed beside the cards. She was so graceful. She moved like a snake. One arm reached lazily

out—one here, another there. Ignace and Marcel watched her, fascinated.

"Now, here we are," she cried brightly. "Draw your chair forward, Ignace; you, M. Fleur, stay where you are. We'll come nearer you. There, that's right. Now, we are all comfy, aren't we? Let me see, have we got everything you want? Oh, no! You two men! I forgot you. Drinks," she added merrily, and, scarcely seeming to move, she pressed a bell and summoned a manservant.

Marcel and De Rigos had no inclination to disagree with her. A beatific sensation of quiescent happiness, the results of the drug, lingered in their brains. To be lazy here by the fire, while this black-haired siren talked to them so sweetly, was simply idyllic. They drank a little of the special drink prepared for them by the Countess's white hands, to the making of which went various liqueurs—cognac, vermouth, amara, orange flower, soda-water, and cracked ice. The world grew brighter as they drank.

"Do you like that?" she asked Marcel with a friendly smile.

"Delicious," he replied, "heavenly."

"That's right; I needn't ask Ignace. He—foolish boy—thinks everything that I give him is nectar."

She laid her white hand on De Rigos's arm and smiled.

She was laying herself out to fascinate these two men: all her wiles were in requisition; and she was succeeding. She knew that. She realised quite well that both were under her charm. For the moment, at any rate.

"Now, let's play," she said brightly. "I've put the cards out, and everything's ready. Shall you explain the game, Ignace, or shall I?"

"You."

Ignace was devouring her with his fathomless brown eyes.

"Yes, you, please," said Marcel.

"Really." She smiled as though flattered. "Then I hope I won't be stupid. I am not very good at cards, but I will do my best to save you, my dear, lazy husband."

She put her elbow on the table and leaned forward, fixing her eyes on Marcel as she explained to him the ins and outs of the game. She was very patient. "Do you understand?" she kept saying; if he did not, she explained it all over again to him, with admirable sweetness and courtesy.

"What a treasure of a wife I've got!" thought De Rigos.

They soon got into the game, and the hours slipped by unnoticed. The Countess plied them with drinks, filled their brains with her bright and witty talk, flashed her eyes at them, smiled on them, and dazzled them both completely.

She, herself, lost.

Marcel was the winner. "You've got the beginner's luck!" said the Countess, sadly, as she watched him sweep his little pile of gold into his pocket.

As a matter of fact, she would not allow herself to win; that would have been stupid. It paid her better that Marcel should be put into a very good temper than that she should win a few paltry louis. So she smiled whenever she lost, and never for a moment looked anything but beamingly happy and gracious.

It was the gayest game of cards imaginable.

The air of the beautiful purple and copper-coloured room rang with peals of laughter. The Countess told them bright little stories every now and then, and kept them all in a merry mood.

It seemed to Marcel one of the most delightful evenings he had ever spent. De Rigos was a charming host—so quiet, so well bred, and always knowing exactly just what was wanted. Man-like, Marcel did not observe that it was De Rigos's wife who was really responsible for all the charm of the entertainment.

The Countess looked at her watch at last and uttered a little cry.

"What hour of the day do you think it is?" she exclaimed. "Three o'clock in the morning! I can scarcely believe it!"

"Impossible!" cried Marcel.

"I assure you," said the Countess, laughing.

She was dead tired herself now, and it would not have surprised her if the hour had been far later even. But she had gained her ends.

She had kept the two men playing until they had lost all idea of time.

As a matter of fact, when they began the game it was past twelve. But in the meantime she had put Ignace's watch right and allowed the hours to return to their proper place. Yes, she was very, very tired. "If I laugh any more I shall go to pieces," she said to herself.

But she had not dared let Marcel leave the house and go out into the street when he woke from his drugged sleep. The clocks there would have betrayed her. He would have seen at once it was past twelve, and not half-past ten!

He was gone at last. The lights were out in the purple room and the Countess was sinking wearily into the great white chair by her dressing-room fire.

"Lock the door, Hawk," she said quietly.

"Yes, dearie, I'll see to that. Hawk'll look after you."

The old woman drew the pins out of her mistress's hair with an incredibly gentle movement, and the long black locks fell over the slender shoulders of the figure in the rose-pink *peignoir*.

"Now let me see them all!"

Mrs. Hawkins glided noiselessly to a drawer, unlocked it, and brought forward an armful of documents, which she placed in her mistress's lap.

"Spray me with that scent of the Count's," murmured the latter languidly. "It makes one forget

one lives in Europe. It's so barbaric and so deliciously sweet and sharp and soothing, all at once."

She was opening the documents as she spoke.

Suddenly she grew excited. "Stop spraying me!" she cried sharply. "Come here. Oh, Hawk, Hawk, what a treasure you are!"

"Am I, dearie?" said Hawkins, coming down on her knees by her mistress, and staring expressionlessly with her drab eyes at the documents in the latter's long white hands.

"Rather," said the Countess.

She tapped the document in her lap.

"This means—well, I scarcely know what it means—it means such a lot," she said quietly. "If I chose to turn it into money there's a fabulous fortune in it."

The drab eyes glistened.

"And are you going to turn it into money, dearie?"

The Countess laughed.

Her long black hair danced with the movement of her head as she threw it back. It seemed as if a shower of snakes was in movement behind her.

Some women are tremendously improved by having their hair let down. It gives them an appearance of youth and innocence very often. But "Mrs. Pack" was not of that type. With her hair unbound and hanging loose over her shoulders hard lines seemed to start out all over her face. Her nose grew beaky. Her chin took on an ugly sharpness. There was too great a discrepancy between the simplicity of the hair hanging loose and the woman herself, and nature refused to play a deceiving part. She looked years older, years plainer, and it would be impossible to say how much more wicked when her hair was down.

"No, not money, I think," she replied, in answer to the nurse's question. "Not money, this time."

"I see what it is, dearie," said Hawkins. "You are going to pay some one off."

"Pay some one back, and not in coin exactly," said the Countess, gaily. "Paying one's debts is not always such a dull game as it seems, eh, Hawk? I owe Lady Allingham this. *Mon Dieu!* when I think that she dared to cut me at a public fête, before Ignace." She clenched her hands. "Other people saw that too," she continued. "There were two ladies at the end of the room who witnessed it, and they have talked. I know, because Mme. de Villiers—a true friend—hinted it to me. It will be all over Paris soon."

"Never you mind, dearie; you're the cleverest of the lot."

"I'm clever enough," said the Countess, with a careless laugh, poring over the documents in her hand. "I've got *this* in my possession. And this is no toy, Hawk."

"Have you looked at the other things I brought you?" asked Hawkins, quietly.

The Countess in looking at them laughed.

There was a big bundle of letters tied with a blue ribbon and written in the handwriting which she recognised immediately. They were from Theodora to Marcel—the letters of years, which the former in her ignorance and innocence had never even asked him to return to her.

The white face with the black hair studied them gloatingly. "Dear, dearest Marcel," she read, "the time is so long when I don't see you. . . . Marcel, darling, do you know that your Theodora thinks only of you—how can you be so cruel to her? . . . My own Marcel, mamma is very angry with me because I walked with you yesterday in the pine forest, but I love you, and so . . . I will meet you to-morrow, dearest Marcel, at three o'clock at the entrance to the campo santo, and let us wander over towards the purple mountains and look for anemones, and forget everything but that we love each other. . . . Marcel, my heart is simply breaking to-day because of you. . . ."

The Countess looked up.

"Hawk," she said, in a thrilling voice, "you're a wonderful woman—you're a treasure. I'll make it another hundred pounds."

"Good, dearie, I don't object. It's the letters that are pleasing you, isn't it? You didn't tell me to bring them, but I saw they were letters—and letters are always useful, ain't they, dearie? So I whisked them up and brought them along as well."

"It was wonderful of you."

She was now examining the document again. To her it was absolutely unintelligible, but that mattered nothing. It was the plan of Marcel Fleur's new airship, for which the French Government was then negotiating. That was all she cared about.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE gulf was rapidly deepening between George and Theodora, but neither spoke of it. They lived their lives in apparent happiness and peace, they went everywhere together, and the world considered them devoted to each other; all the men envied George, and a not inconsiderable number of women deemed that Theodora had been lucky to win such a husband, and yet all the time their estrangement went on increasing. Theodora's pride was in arms now. But so was George's. That was the unfortunate part of it, for when two people consider themselves each the injured party their affairs will necessarily be difficult to adjust.

One evening the Princess was dining with the Allinghams *en famille* when a manservant entered with a telephone message.

"For Madame la Princesse," he said. "She is wanted immediately at the Hôpital des Petites Sœurs."

"At the hospital," exclaimed the Princess, in alarm. "Whatever can that mean? Who wants me?"

The man had written the name on paper, as it was a difficult one to remember, and he read it aloud.

"Krikoffsky," he said suavely. "They say there has been a slight accident and will you go without delay? They have already telephoned to your hotel for you, and so a little time has been lost in finding you, and every moment is of importance."

He delivered this message in a low voice, standing close by the Princess's chair.

"Mamma," cried Theodora, sharply, who was watching the Princess's face. "Oh! George, hold her—go to her, quick; she is going to faint!"

George was at her side in an instant, but she waved him away. "No—no, George, dear, . . . it is all right. . . . I was just surprised for the moment. . . ." She tried her best to collect herself, and in an instant had regained her composure. "Will you forgive me if I leave so unceremoniously?" she said, looking at them both and rising to her feet. "This may be a matter of life and death. My dear, I must not delay a moment."

"But, mamma," Theodora gasped, "what are you going to do?"

"I am going to the hospital."

"It is at the other end of Paris," said George.

"You cannot go alone," said Theodora. "May I not come with you? I cannot bear the thought of you starting off on a journey like that by yourself."

The Princess hesitated.

Theodora came round and threw her arms about her tenderly. "Take me with you, mamma," she said; and, in the softest, lowest voice imaginable, she breathed, "You know you can trust me!"

"Come, then," said the Princess.

She was greatly overwrought and excited, but she did not forget to hold out her hands to George, begging to be forgiven for causing such disturbance, "and for taking Theodora away," she added sweetly. She was so very charming, in spite of her agitation, that George could not possibly harbour any feelings of resentment or annoyance, although the thought had crossed his mind rather painfully that they might have asked him to accompany them.

The door closed and they were gone, and presently George heard the great front doors opening and shutting, and knew that they had driven away.

A footman entered noiselessly.

"You are wanted at the telephone, sir," he said

respectfully. "Or, rather, it is the Princess they have been asking for; but when I told them she was not here, they seemed so upset that I said I would speak to the master."

"Quite right," said George, rising. "I will come immediately."

He went to the telephone in the library.

"Yes," he said, "I am Sir George Allingham. Who's speaking?"

"The Hôpital des Petites Sœurs," replied a woman's voice. "The matron is speaking. Forgive me for troubling you, but can you tell me if the Princess has already started? If not, would you kindly prevent her from doing so?"

"She has already started," said George.

Through the telephone he heard an exclamation of regret.

"I am too late," said the voice.

"She is on her way there now," said George.

"I am very sorry," said the matron. "The fact is, her coming now is of no importance. M. Krikoffsky is already dead. He passed away five minutes ago. We did our best to keep him alive till the Princess arrived, as he was so desperately anxious to see her, but it was in vain. It was a clot of blood on the brain—the result of a fall he had lately. He had reopened an old sword-wound in the knee and neglected it, and was in a serious condition when he came here. That is what the doctors think."

The interview was ended. The telephone rang off. George put the receiver back in its place and returned to the dining-room. He drank some coffee and a liqueur and smoked a cigarette or two, but his mind was with that conversation on the telephone all the time.

In the meantime Theodora and the Princess had driven rapidly through Paris in a motor-brougham, the daughter supporting the mother in her arms and begging her not to grieve.

She felt a tremor run through the Princess's slight form, and she knew there was more than ordinary suffering in her mother's heart now, but not a word was said; they drove in silence through the night. It was raining, and the mist of fine small drops covered the windows of the brougham and made soft music round them. The night was grey and oppressive. Something ominous was lurking in the heavy lowering air, out of which all the ozone and oxygen seemed to have taken flight, leaving Paris to pant and struggle with an enormous depression.

At last the motor turned noiselessly in through the great gates of the hospital, and came to a standstill in the courtyard where the bare, leafless trees stood in a circle, like sentinels.

There were a few preliminaries to be gone through —names to be given and taken, all of which was done very quickly, and then the matron herself, dressed in a spotless white gown and immaculate starched cap, appeared at the carriage window.

"I am so sorry," she said quickly, breaking the news immediately, "I fear your journey is a wasted one."

"What! Is he——"

"Dead," said the matron. "He passed away a quarter of an hour ago. I tried to stop you from starting, but it was too late."

"I should like to see him," said the Princess, presently. "Stay here, dearest," she said to Theodora. "I will go with the matron alone."

She disappeared, and was gone some ten minutes. Her face was very white and her lips trembled when she returned. Sweetly thanking the matron for her kindness she entered the brougham and sank back in a corner next to Theodora.

"I am glad I came—I am glad I saw him," she murmured presently.

Suddenly the Princess's emotions overcame her self-control. Her fortitude gave way, and she broke

into an abandon of weeping, there in the corner of the brougham.

Out of the shadowy past the story of Krikoffsky came stealing in all its details, and her own life and that of her late husband, Hugh Derrington, was revived and reconstructed in her brain . . . all the pain . . . all the old pain returned. . . .

Yet now that Krikoffsky was dead, a fresh problem presented itself.

He had died of the old wound, the doctors said.

And so he died, after all, at Hugh Derrington's hand! As that thought became clear to her, she struggled with an overmastering horror and trembled in Theodora's arms.

"Mamma, mamma, you mustn't!" cried her daughter, in terrible distress. "Can't you tell me? Can't you confide in me? I am a woman, like yourself. Surely we two together might bear this burden that you are suffering under so bitterly."

Then the Princess told her.

Sitting there in a corner of the brougham, with the raindrops on the window, the great city enveloped in greyness and a morose atmosphere—an atmosphere that seemed to have stolen away all its gaiety for the nonce—Theodora listened to a story that thrilled her as she had never in her life been thrilled before. Wonder—amaze—alarm—horror chased themselves over her mind . . . the story did not take long . . . and the end of it was that it was another secret which she must keep from George.

"George must never know," said the Princess.

"Never," echoed Theodora, desperately.

When they got home George came into the hall to greet them, and his manner was so full of such deep tenderness and thoughtfulness that both women were touched—though differently. The Princess felt the comfort of a masculine care and sympathy. Theodora said to herself this was like the George of old days. The mother went straight to her rooms and

asked to be left in solitude till the morning; Theodora entered her boudoir and threw herself on the sofa by the fire. To her surprise George followed her.

"I am so sorry for the miserable time you have had—you two," began George, a little stiffly, but evidently with the best intentions, standing opposite her, looking down at her, and debating within himself whether he should sit on the edge of her couch.

"Yes, it was dreadful for poor mamma."

"They telephoned to me, and I heard all about it from the matron," said George. "I hope that did not matter."

"What did you hear?" said Theodora, sitting up suddenly.

"That this man Krikoffsky was dead," said George, quietly.

"So George knows his name," Theodora was thinking. "Oh, I hope he will forget it."

She turned the subject, and began to talk of some new music which she was interested in.

"Am I to be kept in the dark about this matter?" asked George, angrily. "Am I to understand from your manner that this is another case of something you refuse to discuss with me? Although I am your husband, and you have risen from my dinner-table—you and your mother—and gone out of this house to see a man die, when you return you maintain a resolute silence about the matter, treating me as though I were some absolute outsider."

"I am sorry; I——"

But she found it impossible to go on. What should she say? She mustn't even allow George to imagine that there was anything hidden there.

"I am very, very tired," she broke off suddenly; "I think I will go to my rooms."

And she left him; and the black, evil shadow came creeping—creeping over their house and over their lives. It was like the shadow of some ugly,

unkempt building standing in a lovely garden. When the sun went down the shadow grew darker and longer, till it covered the bright flowers, turning the white blossoms grey, and stealing the redness out of the roses.

As she was crossing the hall she heard a sharp voice talking at the door to the footman; and the next moment she saw, to her amazement, that a man, bareheaded and cloakless, was coming in.

He caught sight of her in her white gown under the shaded lights, and rushed towards her wildly.

"Theodora, where is George?" he cried in a piercing voice. "The plan of the airship is stolen."

George had come out of the boudoir and was standing in the doorway, listening, and looking at Marcel.

CHAPTER XXIX

NEXT morning at *déjeuner* George showed how deeply he had been angered by that scene of the night before, when Marcel had called Theodora loudly by her name before the listening servants, and had shouted in a frenzied way that the plans of the airship had been stolen. An expression of chilling reserve was on his face. He refused to discuss the matter with Theodora. His one comment was that, so far, nothing had been discovered.

Theodora, answering to that frigid and displeased look, said to him suddenly—

"You may as well know—if it is any satisfaction to you—that I had already forbidden M. Fleur ever to come and see me again. The very sound of his name is hateful to me," she added low, but not so low that George could not hear.

He heard and remembered it for many a long day after.

She sat there turning over her late-post letters, and presently she opened one whose handwriting was attracting her, partly by its boldness and partly by its familiarity.

To her amazement she found that this note began "Dear George."

But before she had had time to think, its contents, which were brief, had been scanned by her eye.

"DEAR GEORGE,

"I feel I must write you a line to thank you for the money you so generously gave me, and to tell you how deeply sorry I am that a break should

occur in our friendship. Of course, I quite understand that our sweet Theodora does not care for me, and never will. That is easily explainable. But, then, I do not blame her, nor must you. I only hope that your happiness will be as great as you deserve.

"Yours, a little sadly, but ever gratefully,

"GWENDOLEN DE RIGOS."

Theodora's face was white, but her expression was calm and indifferent when she had finished reading. She looked up, then held the letter in a trembling hand towards George.

"This is for you, I think," she said tranquilly. "By some stupid mistake it has been addressed to me. I am very sorry."

George took the letter, glanced at it, and uttered a loud exclamation of annoyance.

He realised at once that this was another of that impossible woman's tricks. Would she continue to annoy him like this for ever? Would nothing put a stop to her half-mischievous, half-cruel, and wholly unpardonable conduct? Even her marriage with a rich man who could give her every luxury did not seem to have cured her. He looked furtively at Theodora, uncertain quite what to say to her.

"She has done that purposely," he exclaimed.

Theodora was silent.

"The money she speaks of was long, long ago, when she was in great difficulties."

Still Theodora said nothing.

He went on drinking his coffee, and lit a cigarette as soon as possible to relieve his feelings, for Theodora quickly escaped from the breakfast-room and disappeared.

She never knew how that day went by. It seemed endless, leaden of foot, and lagging dreadfully, in spite of all its engagements.

In the evening before dinner she entered her dressing-room with a tired look upon her lovely face.

Little lines of weariness were beginning to show themselves, lines which renewed happiness would quickly chase away, however, for she was but a girl still. Her sable cloak slipped off her shoulders into the ready hands of her maid. With a gesture of despair, she turned away from the long mirror, in whose truthful depths she read only too clearly the traces of her distress, and, as her maid held towards her a lovely teagown of white crêpe and ermine, she sighed, and sank into a deep armchair by the fire.

She tried to quiet her thoughts, but do what she could that letter of the morning would persist in troubling her. Why had he paid that odious woman sums of money? Her mind went over and over the phrases of the letter—"How deeply sorry I am that a break should occur in our friendship." That sentence proved plainly the absolute camaraderie that had existed between George and the Countess. And then that sentence which referred to her—"I do not blame her—nor must you." The thought of that goaded her to distraction. It meant George had discussed her.

She rose quickly, and nervously began to pace up and down the room. She was beginning to feel that she could not much longer endure the strain she was living under. Her restless movements were interrupted by the coming of the housekeeper into the room.

"What is it?" asked Theodora, almost crossly for her.

"I wish to speak to your ladyship about a young woman who came after a place here as under-housemaid, my lady. I have seen her, but I do not think she is strong enough to do the work."

"But why on earth do you bother me about it?" asked Theodora sharply, her nerves all on edge. "Are you not able to manage these domestic affairs yourself?"

"Yes, my lady; but as the young woman brought a strong recommendation from the Duchess d'Ailes, I was a little doubtful about refusing her until I had consulted your ladyship."

"Very well. Leave the Duchess's letter with me," replied Theodora. "I will let you know what shall be done."

The housekeeper gave it to her and retired. Theodora took the letter and walked to her writing-table. She sat there absently toying with an exquisite jewelled penholder for a moment, but suddenly she remembered that it had been a wedding present. She threw it down with a nervous gesture of disgust. How far away and useless all that seemed now! And yet she had not been married many months, and there were years to be gone through and lived out still. They seemed to stretch before her in a long, dreary procession of hopeless, deadly dulness. How would she have to go through them? Hopeless, alone, unloved? The prospect seemed too terrible, and yet it was all that her weary brain could see ahead of her. She envied, at that moment, the poorest person in the streets. What was the use of luxury and riches if one had not love? A cold shudder ran through her as she shrugged her delicate shoulders as if in an effort to dismiss the subject, and she absently turned over the Duchess's letter of recommendation which she was still holding. She smiled as she noticed the well-known handwriting.

"Dear Carolina," she said to herself; "how sweet she always is, and thoughtful! I expect she has perjured her kind little soul to give this young woman a good character!"

She read the letter through slowly.

"The Duchess d'Ailes begs to recommend the bearer of this note, Miss Margaret Wood, in whom she has every confidence, and whom she is certain will prove satisfactory."

As she read that, a host of ideas seemed suddenly to be loosened in her brain. One after another flashed before her.

"I shall keep that letter," she said to herself, deliberately. "It may prove useful to me."

CHAPTER XXX

WHERE was Ivan? He had vanished as if the earth had swallowed him up and left no traces anywhere of the curious old man with his peculiar mixture of genius and childishness. That he would have planned deliberately to disappear was extremely improbable; in fact, that he could have done so was hardly possible, for his repeated illnesses had weakened him more and more, until he had reached a stage of childishness which was manifest in almost everything except, fortunately, in his work connected with aviation and the improvement of the airship. It was a more than curious psychological problem—this state of his weakened mind, strong only on one point—his invention.

"Where is Ivan?"

The question rang through the fevered brain of Marcel by day and became a horrible *cauchemar* to haunt his troubled sleep by night.

What could have become of him? A hundred different useless and imaginary solutions and fancies came to Marcel, the most persistent being the thought that he had had some accident in the street, and had been taken, unknown and dying, to some hospital, there to breathe his last alone and uncared for.

Meanwhile *Le Jour* knew!

Armand Roche, the journalist, had never been idle since that day, weeks before, when he had met Krikoffsky in the *café* and had gathered from him hints of old Ivan's story.

The vague things he had heard had taken root

in his imaginative, impulsive mind, and had flourished exceedingly. He had not let the grass grow under his feet. He had tracked the old Pole to his lair—as he put it to himself in his picturesque language. Krikoffsky had said that Ivan lived in the same house as Marcel Fleur, *the* Marcel Fleur, so it had not been difficult then to track him. Every one knew where the aeronaut lived; his house was as famous as the Louvre itself. Day after day the journalist had watched it in whatever spare time he had at his command. The *concierge* had become a friend of his, succumbing easily to the glitter of occasional five-franc pieces for her little ones, knowing him only as a journalist anxious for the latest airship news, which she willingly gave, together with much other useful information. But Ivan seldom went out, only, in fact, when it was very fine, and that was rare in December.

One sunny morning, however, the heart of Armand bounded within him. He saw issuing from the doorway the bent, old form of the inventor.

He followed him down the street, keeping well behind him. The old man walked slowly, looking neither to right nor left as he went his way. Presently he turned into a *café*, which was evidently a haunt of his and where he was apparently well known.

Armand Roche followed and seated himself at the next table, where he began reading diligently his paper. After some few minutes had passed he leant over and spoke—

"I think, monsieur, that we have met before. We have a mutual friend, an artist."

"I do not remember," replied Ivan, suspiciously, as was his nature.

"You must remember Krikoffsky, monsieur? He introduced us here."

The old man's face lit up with intelligence.

"Ah," he answered quickly. "My friend Krikoffsky! My only friend! Let us talk of him. You know him well, then?"

The journalist was all sympathy and attention at once. He talked, and talked well, interesting the old man by his sympathy both for him and for the singer, and his ready comprehension of the great pleasure this poor lonely man had experienced in meeting his old friend here in Paris.

They drank together. Armand was an artist, too, he said—a singer. He had lately been fortunate, and things were going well.

Ivan must lunch with him. He plied him with wine, and they sat talking on and on. The old man grew more and more at ease under the influence of the wine and the sympathetic manner of his companion.

After some time the journalist saw with delight that Ivan was getting more confidential. He turned the conversation again to Krikoffsky.

"He was one of my greatest friends," he said. "He told me all. There are no secrets between him and me. How interested he is in you! He loves you, and the admiration he has for your genius and inventive powers cannot be put into words."

Ivan was touched. His feeble old brain, weakened by illness and disappointment, was beginning to lose its grasp again. So this man knew! Then he could talk to him without compunction.

The journalist waited in silence, trembling for the words he saw were on the old man's lips, though he hardly dared hope they would be uttered.

At last Ivan spoke.

"You know, then. My friend, it is a relief to speak to you. Our friend Krikoffsky has told you. Then I need be silent no longer to you."

"Yes, I know," Armand replied softly, laying his strong young hand in the wrinkled palm of the poor old man. And so the thing had been told. Bit by bit—little by little—from a confused jumble of words and phrases, Armand Roche laid the pieces of the puzzle together, until it stood out clear and defined in his mind. Ah, what copy for his paper! And so

certain, so absolutely certain! It meant his fortune, and a great coup for *Le Jour*.

All Paris would speak of the brilliant young journalist who had unearthed the grim secret with such untiring energy in the interests of truth. He was a made man with this priceless information in his possession.

Old Ivan was very happy. It was long since he had been able to talk as he had talked to-day. Long, long, they sat there. Armand Roche left the subject which had enthralled him, after he could gain no more, and led the old man, through wandering paths, to speak of his youth, his country, and the topics of the day. Roche's remarks had something brilliant about them which pleased Ivan greatly.

They made an appointment for the next day, and then at last they rose to go. Ivan to his home, and Roche as fast as a motor-cab could take him to the great offices on the boulevard.

His chief saw him instantly in response to the few hurried words he scribbled on his card. The interview was long and private. The editor was quick to recognise the extent of the news.

Here, indeed, was an *affaire*. What a scandal! For an hour they were closeted together, discussing it, planning, and plotting. At last all was settled.

"Ivan must be got away from his present abode," said the great man with decision; "but it must be done properly. He must leave of his own free will. He must come to us to help him in his misery and distress; you understand?" he said meaningly. "You must manage this, Monsieur Roche."

"I can and will," replied the young man, with assurance.

"Get him away. Say that you will befriend him. Say that you have been left money; that you will pay everything; that he shall have everything he can possibly desire. You are so sorry for him! You understand? With you he shall have peace, and

quiet, and no more worries. And money; lots of it. Enough to make him comfortable for the rest of his life. We will pay for everything."

"I could take him to my flat. I am alone there, but there is not much room, and I have no servant," suggested Roche.

"Never mind. Take a furnished flat. Give him his own rooms. Everything, but get him and keep him! Make yourself necessary to him. Go now. Telephone us what you have done. Here is money."

Armand Roche lost no time. It was not a difficult matter to persuade the old man. He was weak and feeble; here was a resting-place and a friend who would care for him, and to whom he could speak freely. All was easily arranged, and Ivan disappeared as surely as if he had vanished into the air in one of his own airships!

Le Jour was once more going to do something great.

This was the finest thing that had come its way for ages, remarkable as were the coups which this journal was in the habit of making.

They wanted to see what Marcel Fleur could do without Ivan's help. How would he stand this test? Would he go under?

Le Jour would wait its time. Patriotism and truth! That was the keynote of the affair. Here was an old man cruelly robbed—by a great inventor, it was true, but that could not be helped. A blackguard was a blackguard whatever might be his position. And *Le Jour* would see fair play!

France should have the airship; but her hands should be clean. *Le Jour* would guard its country from a slur on her fair name. There was the Englishman, too, Sir George Allingham. Where did he come in this affair? Ivan had said that he knew nothing. Of that they must be certain. They must work silently and quickly. "Truth, Justice, and Patriotism" —that was their motto!

And so the days flew by. Marcel Fleur was watched and shadowed. All went well. It was more than evident that all was true that the old man had said.

Marcel Fleur was as much in evidence as ever, but nothing happened. No new trials took place. Something was wrong, evidently. There was a hitch, and *Le Jour* knew why.

On the morning of Boxing Day the telephone bell rang and rang in Armand Roche's flat. It was only five o'clock, but it rang until it woke him out of his deep sleep. He ran to the receiver angrily and answered the call.

The message he received left him standing amazed, with the receiver in his hands, unheeding the repeated calls of the exchange to know if he had not yet finished, and unmindful of the fact that they had relentlessly cut him off. The plans of the airship had been stolen. Sir George Allingham had been arrested and was in prison.

"Take Ivan away," had commanded his chief, "and quickly! No matter where, but out of the country! It is safer to get him right away now. Try Italy. He will like that. Go with him. Keep him there. Take him to-day. Say you are ill. Anything! But go!"

CHAPTER XXXI

THEODORA sat back in the corner of the railway carriage and shut her eyes, and the deafening roar of the train as it rushed through the night seemed to beat a fitting accompaniment to the tumultuous discords of her own heart.

She had left George behind her.

That was the note that throbbed and repeated itself insistently over and over again in all the medley of her emotions. She was here, flying through France into Italy as quickly as the long black train could carry her, and George remained behind, alone.

The shades were drawn over the lights in the carriage. The only other occupant wished to sleep. All was dim and shadowy ; a sickly, pallid little glow just kept off utter darkness. Theodora sat bolt upright in one corner. Her companion—a handsome Russian lady of some forty years—extended herself at full length opposite and slept profoundly. On and on flew the train, casting scarlet fire-flowers over the white snow, and waking sleeping villages with its demoniac shrieks and yells as it rushed along. Theodora listened and shuddered. She pressed her face to the window and looked out. Whiteness gleamed at her, lit by the glow from the engine's great red eyes. So it was snowing heavily. And in Paris? Was it snowing, snowing there? Were the vast white drifts coming softly down on the sleeping city? And was George, by chance, looking from his window and watching . . . ?

No. She would not think of George.

"I wonder if he waited a long time for me to come down and hear the carol-singers." . . . And then, at last, all the carols were sung . . . the singers drank their wassail within the house . . . they departed . . . George went to the library, perhaps . . . or did he go into her boudoir? . . . Did he look for her? . . . Had he perhaps found out by now that she was gone? . . .

No. She must not think of George.

When he came into her boudoir was there in his eyes that old look . . . did he come in quietly and turn to find her, to take her in his arms and whisper, "You are my love, and this is Christmas Eve"?

No. She dared not think of George.

Why should she imagine him whispering words like that to her? Why should she hear his voice saying, "You are my love" instead of the chilling, formal little speeches he had made her in the carriage driving homewards from Carolina's reception? Why was her ear forming for her the deep tone that had always come into his voice when he held her in his arms, instead of the cold and distant quality that had distinguished that same voice as he said to her, "It is you, not I, who are responsible if things go wrong in our lives together?"

"Madame, you are in distress. . . . Pardon me. . . . I am so sorry. . . . I too . . . I have suffered. . . ."

The Russian lady had lifted herself slowly, with an inimitable, panther-like grace, from her seat, and was leaning towards the figure in the corner, who sat there with her beautiful red-gold head bowed in her hands, while her breath came in sharp, ungovernable sobs, and those terrible tears that would have their way at last rained down her cheeks as though she were some broken-hearted child.

"I am so sorry, so sorry, madame. . . ."

Like one in a dream Theodora heard the soft voice speaking, and somehow the very fact that there

was another woman near her carried a dole of comfort to her stricken soul.

"Let me give you a little cognac, you poor, dear lady," went on the voice, after a while. "And see, I have two cushions here. You must take one, and then you will lie down comfortably and fall asleep perhaps."

On and on went the train. Aix was left behind. The peaceful grey châteaux and villas were giving way to wilder scenery. Snow-clad mountains rose higher and higher, and on the slopes of one appeared, through the blackness of the wintry night, a huge cross of light that could be seen shining for miles round. Many passengers in that Christmas train, looking from the windows as they fled onwards through the silent, snow-covered country, were stirred and uplifted and comforted strangely by the sight of that great gleaming crucifix hanging out on the mountain slopes—for those who travel long journeys on Christmas morn are not of the happiest kind usually, and the cross had its own meaning to many.

It was the last thing Theodora saw before she fell asleep under the kindly ministrations of her Russian friend.

"You will be better for a rest, my poor child."

"You are so very good," murmured Theodora. She lay full length on the seat with her head on the friendly Russian's little cushion and her great fur-lined travelling cloak tucked in carefully all round her by those white, subtle hands. She had swallowed a little cognac. Now she was stupid from sheer exhaustion. She would sleep and forget for a little while.

Again she thought of George.

Why had he been so cruel to her? He was a man, and older by many years than she. He should have taken every care of her. Instead, he had treated her with such coldness, such bitterness, that he had

driven her to this. It was the unfairness of it that she minded so. All she had done was to be strictly and rigidly honourable, and to keep Marcel Fleur's secret because she had promised to do so. That was her only fault. And for that she had been terribly punished. She had seen George's whole nature change towards her. He had taken away his love and given her a half-tolerant, half-indifferent courtesy instead, with coldness and contempt barely hidden underneath. She had done her best. He had done his worst. He had even discussed her with the Countess de Rigos! And all the while he had been warning her against that awful woman, exhorting her not to make friends with her, commanding her, in fact, not to take her into her confidence; he had been pursuing a friendship with her himself, of which she, Theodora, had been absurdly and ridiculously unconscious until she read that letter beginning "Dear George." Then and not until then had her eyes been opened. Now they would never close again!

She raised her head for a moment, searching for her handkerchief, and suddenly, through the window, she glimpsed the gleaming crucifix on the mountain side. For a moment she stared at it breathless. Then she sank down again and drew her furred cloak up over her face, as though to shut herself in alone with her desolation and misery.

She wished she had not seen it. What was it doing out there in the night and the silence? Was it calling to people? Was it saying something to her? And if so, what was its message?

"Peace on earth and good will." . . . Was it anything like that?

She shivered and drew her cloak more closely round her.

And in Paris, just at that time, George was walking up and down past her door, noticing the light still burning there, praying that she was not very unhappy, and resolving that Christmas Day must heal the

breach between them, even if he had to confess himself all in the wrong.

Theodora's brain grew drowsy. Thought became confused and vague. And now the great gleaming cross seemed to be saying to her over and over again, "George"! As her thoughts slipped from her that one idea lingered strangely. . . . Then she slept and knew no more.

. . . Her companion, stooping over her lightly some time later, saw that the sad young lips were curved in a smile, though the long eyelashes were wet on the beautiful pale cheeks.

"I am glad she is not really so miserable. No one can be unhappy who is rich and as lovely as that," she said to herself, drawing Theodora's dressing-bag stealthily towards her as she prepared to leave the train. "She is evidently a wealthy woman. I only wish I could get at her luggage. But there are sure to be jewels here. Well, farewell, beautiful unknown! You are doing a poor desperate wanderer a good turn by your unhappiness, if that is any comfort to you!"

CHAPTER XXXII

How wonderful it is, that coming into Italy—coming from grey winter cities into a land flooded far and wide with sunshine. To find the sun again, glittering and radiant, and vivid blue in the heavens after the dark skies of London and Paris, seems like a magic act to one who travels by train direct from one country into the other.

The little age-old city of Pietra Santa lay stretched luxuriously in golden sunlight at the foot of the olive-covered hills, and as Theodora wandered out of the railway station on the afternoon of Boxing Day, she felt a sudden uplifting of her spirits and a quite definite and exquisite easing of all her troubles.

True, her dressing-bag had been stolen in the night. That was a nuisance. Her kind travelling companion had turned out to be a thief. That was a sad affair. There she was now, alone, in a strange city, with very little money, and no clothes of any kind except those she was wearing. Luckily her ticket had been in her tiny sachet with her handkerchief and a few louis, and this had been lying underneath her as she slept in the train, and so had been saved. She had the five hundred lire in Italian notes, which she had exchanged at the frontier, concealed in the bodice of her gown. Otherwise, she was penniless. And yet, because she was in Italy, and because the great plain and the glittering Mediterranean and the mountains in the background were all flooded with sunlight, and the skies were pure and cloudless, she was almost happy.

It had begun badly, her adventure. Yet even the incident of the dressing bag could not distress her much.

"She must have been in great straits," she mused. "I hope she wasn't bitterly disappointed to find nothing worth stealing but the gold appointments. She probably threw it away in disgust afterwards, poor lady. Anyway, she was awfully nice and kind to me. And, perhaps, she too, like myself, was just a soldier of fortune."

This exhilarating air, touched with snow from the purple mountains in the distance, gave her strength and courage, while the exquisite dreaming beauty of the little Italian mountain city where the train had just deposited her was entering into her very soul. She had left the station, and wandered out into the wide, white old Roman road that ran through the middle of the town, but the amazing loveliness and magnificence of this out-of-the-way little place that nobody ever goes to, brought her to a sudden stand-still.

It was five o'clock, and a scarlet sun was setting right into the sea. The world wore a look of such ineffable unworldliness that it was difficult to believe one looked on real earth and sky and sea. All the clouds were on fire, and rose-lights sparkled on the blue glitter of the Mediterranean and on the purple and snow-wreathed mountains in the background. Far away in the distance, a low shadowy mass seemed rising out of the sea, all blurred and indistinct, hidden away in that vast sunset haze of gold and orange glory. It was Sardinia, that far-off shadow darkening the dazzling waves and clouds. And inland stretched a plain that gently swelled upwards into low slopes covered with figs and olives and beautiful little villages; and beyond, higher still, the great range of purple mountains. Out of the city itself rose a tall red campanile, and a beautiful old cathedral, whose white dome was like a bubble on the still plain. Further down the plain, to right and

left, were clustered other wonderful little antique cities, with their domes and towers rising up into the sunlight.

Theodora stood looking about her entranced. Everything was delightful, so full of life and colour. A little scarlet cart passed her, full of slabs of marble from Carrara, a few miles off. The cart had bright blue wheels, and its horse was pranked out with scarlet and gold bells, and had an enormous merry-looking feather over his ears, while the driver wore a coat of flaming orange, such as the Italian driver so dearly loves. Just opposite were the old brown gates of the little walled town, maddeningly beautiful in their curves and proportions. People moved about lazily, yet cheerfully. There was a flashing of dark eyes and white teeth. Just because the sun was shining they were happy here. Theodora laughed suddenly at the thought.

"I'm going to be happy too," she said to herself determinately. Her mood had changed. She was no longer the weeping wretched woman in the train with her heart wrung beyond endurance. Now she was almost gay and full of curiosity. She was out in the world all alone. It was a little terrifying. But still, one must not think of that! It was decidedly exciting. And now that she had stopped thinking about George (who was in the cells just then!), she could see that life was holding out to her a most fascinating adventure.

"But first of all I must get my hair cut. I wonder if I can find a barber."

An old woman passing stared at her with the frank admiration of the Italian peasant and bade her a happy day—*felice giorno*—in the pretty, flower-like language of her kind.

"Does the signorina like Pietra Santa?" she asked, reading aright, with her subtle instinct, the look in Theodora's wide violet eyes.

"I think it's the most beautiful place I've ever seen in my life," answered Theodora.

"Truly, signorina." Lively amazement showed in the black eyes. "But not beautiful compared to the cities the signorina must have seen," she said politely, with the ineffable courtesy of the Italian peasant. "Still it is beautiful," she went on. "In our cathedral there, there is a marble staircase which Michael Angelo himself had a hand in. Ah! the great Michael Angelo and the great Leonardo da Vinci, they both lived here in their time. And see!" She pointed towards a little hamlet on the slopes nestling among the mountains. "There is Valdiscastello, where was born our great poet Carducci!"

This delighted Theodora beyond words.

It was only an old peasant woman—a *contadina*—but her eyes kindled when she spoke of the art of the sculptor and the painter and the poet.

"Is there anything I can do for the signorina?" she was asking.

"Can you tell me where I shall find a hairdresser?"

"Si, signorina, subito. Just here, along the Via Donatello, you will find an excellent one, who will coif your hair in the very latest fashion."

Theodora thanked her, gave her a lira, and hastened down the Via Donatello, a narrow street with high, many windowed houses on either side, out of which leaned innumerable women and children. For to-day was Saturday afternoon, and festa.

She entered the shop and found herself the object of much curiosity to the groups of youths who stood about within. The barber hastened forward. When he heard that she wanted her hair cut off he looked horrified.

"But it would be a sin, signorina, to cut off that wonderful hair!"

"It's too heavy," said Theodora, excusing herself for what she knew was an extraordinary proceeding. "Please do it as quickly as you can."

He shrugged his shoulders, exclaiming that he

was "desolat," but it should be as the signorina wished. He put her in a chair, wrapped her up in a vast sheet, took the pins out of her hair, and as it fell over her shoulders, broke into a cannonade of exclamations. It was so funny that she found herself laughing merrily, and when she peeped back over her shoulder, she discovered that the whole population of Pietra Santa had come in to look at her, even the little babies.

And here she was, Lady Allingham, in a little barber's shop, in the far-off province of Lucca, with butchers, bakers, and wine-sellers and peasants, and drivers, all looking on while she had her hair cut.

"How beautiful she is!" went like a wave over the assembled company.

The barber was looking everywhere for his scissors, and it amused Theodora to see how light-heartedly he took their disappearance.

"They were here this morning!" he said.

At last he found them. His face fell several degrees as he advanced towards the lovely signorina in the chair, with the red-gold hair floating in great waves over her shoulders.

"Ah, signorina, I cannot!" he cried.

"No! no!" agreed the crowd, all chipping in as if it were a matter of vital importance to every one of them.

"You must," said Theodora.

"I cannot," he almost wailed.

"You can, and you must," she said firmly.

"Very well, signorina," he said meekly.

He heaved a tremendous sigh and advanced. Taking up a handful of her hair, he attacked it furiously with the scissors. A groan burst from the assembled crowd as the long tress fell to the floor.

"But that was terrible," he muttered.

He paused and wiped his face with an enormous handkerchief. Then he went back to work, and, with smothered groans and sighs, slowly denuded that

beautiful head of its wonderful gleaming hair, while Pietra Santa panted and sighed and groaned and sympathised in the background.

The operation was almost completed, and Theodora was staring at herself in the mirror, when the crowd parted to make way for a newcomer—a tall, lithe young man, deeply sunburnt, with curly brown hair and merry eyes.

"This a barber's?" he said in English. His eyes met Theodora's in the glass, and he started.

Her hair, cropped round her head, had broken into little clustering curls. Instead of spoiling her beauty, it enhanced it a hundredfold.

She felt the colour running up into her cheeks. How maddening to be caught like this by some one who was obviously a gentleman!

And yet she had not dared to go to Florence until she had made the requisite changes that would turn her from Lady Allingham into Miss Margaret Wood.

Suddenly a noise began in the background. They were squabbling, these people. A woman had crept forward slyly, and picked up one of those gleaming tresses. Another had followed. Some one had remonstrated. A scene began. The hair was worth money, that was certain. If Nella and Assunta could have some, why not the others? All in a moment their voices rose and rose, and eyes flashed, and wildest excitement prevailed.

Theodora, in terror, sprang to her feet, and moved backwards from the gesticulating and vociferating crowd.

"It's all right," said a manly voice; "you needn't be in the least alarmed. It's only gas!"

"I am a stranger here," said Theodora.

"Well, I'm an Australian," he said, "and I've got a good muscle of my own, you bet, and I'll take care of you. Don't you be frightened. But, truly, you've not the slightest need to. They're simply wild with admiration, and that's the truth of it."

"It's very good of you," said Theodora.

"If you'll let me, I'll see you safely away from here."

"What will the signorina do with her beautiful hair?" asked the barber, who was still pale from the operation. "Would she wish that I gave her ten francs?"

"Yes," said Theodora, hastily, anxious only to get away. "And you can give the money to the poor."

She put her hat on, and tied it over her head with a big veil. A sudden change came over the Australian's face as he heard her words. Why, then, was this beautiful girl parting with such hair as that since it was not for money? Obviously she was not selling it, as he had at first imagined. What reason, then, had she in coming to this little Italian barber, all alone like this, to have her hair cut off?

She was the most amazingly beautiful creature he had ever seen in his life, and here in the little out-of-the-way township her clothes breathed an air of luxury and fashion that proclaimed her unmistakably a woman of wealth and elegance, though, as a matter of fact, Theodora had expressly chosen this suit of black serge, and the great mouse-coloured cloth travelling-cloak, with its squirrel lining, to give her an appearance of simplicity and plainness. But everything she wore came from Paris! Her little black hat, trimmed with black wings, had that easy daring *chic* that only Parisian fingers can impart. Even as they walked out of the hairdresser's together, the Australian had arrived at the quick conclusion that there was some mystery connected with this lovely lady; and, following rapidly on that came the corollary that if she were in distress and needed a knight, he was only too ready to enter her service.

They stepped out into Via Donatello, and again Theodora was thrilled with the vivid penetrating loveliness of Pietra Santa, with its marble steps and monuments, its superb old palaces, and its olive trees on

the slopes, rising so steeply right up out of the city that the pale towers and domes seemed to stand out against a wide background of softest grey-green. The sky was red, still red with sunset. The air was exquisitely clear. Theodora smiled from sheer pleasure.

"I am just a bird of passage here," the Australian was saying. "I've come over from Pisa. A friend told me that this was the place in Italy that pleased and interested him most after Rome."

"It's so wild, and yet so marvellously artistic," said Theodora. "I shall never be able to tear myself away."

She stopped just then, and said quietly that she would bid him good-bye, as she was going in here to her hotel.

He took off his hat, said good-bye, and turned away with that spring on the heel that characterises Australian men. But why was he smiling? Simply because that was his hotel, too. He had stayed there the night before, and he knew perfectly well that half an hour ago he was absolutely the only person there, beside the proprietor, his wife, and his bambini, and he had taken his room there till Monday.

When Theodora had chosen a room looking on the old piazza, with its great stone gateway, she went quietly out to do some shopping.

At half-past seven that night a tall young woman, with a beautiful, pale complexion, scarlet mouth, great violet eyes, and a head covered with short, red-gold curls, came down into the *salotto* to dine. She was dressed in a black wool jersey and a short brown linsey skirt, with cheap yellow boots and thick stockings. She carried a scaldino—a little earthenware basket filled with hot coal—in her hands to warm her, just as all the Pietra Santa women did, and she told herself contentedly that no one would take her for a lady of fashion now.

Then her heart beat sickeningly. Sitting dining

at a little table near the door was the Australian, the person she would have most wished not to see. He had witnessed her hair being cut off. He had seen her in her Paris clothes. Now he saw her in these local garments, dressed like a village girl, though he knew—he must know—very well she was nothing of the sort. How annoying it was! And, perhaps, how dangerous!

CHAPTER XXXIII

THERE was one person in Paris who might reasonably be expected to be overwhelmed with grief at the disappearance of Theodora, and that was her own mother, the Princess. But, luckily for her, this charming lady had a secret source of consolation unknown to any one in the world except herself and her daughter. She knew where Theodora was.

The note left on the dressing-table which bade George "keep the truth from mamma" was only a blind.

It was intended to throw dust in his eyes, and to make him believe that the Princess knew nothing of her daughter's disappearance, so that there would be no chance of him going to her and trying to drag the truth from her lips.

As a matter of fact, though she was not aware exactly where Theodora was going, or when she would depart, she knew she intended to leave George, and there had been a bitter scene on the afternoon of Caroline's dinner. She had remonstrated, pleaded, wept. But she had been finally won over by the look of grief and misery in her daughter's eyes, and by the story Theodora had sobbed out to her of Sir George Allingham's harshness to her, in spite of all her efforts to make him happy. And then the Princess heard, too, the ugly incident of the Countess de Rigos's letter, thanking George for money he had given her, and mourning over the break Theodora had caused in their friendship. All this, and many another little detail piled up by the overstrung and unhappy girl-

wife, had made such a pitiable story that when Theodora exclaimed, "I shall kill myself if I cannot get away alone," her mother in terror had bade her do what she thought best, and had promised to reveal nothing whatever to George or to anyone. And Theodora had promised, in her turn, to take the utmost care of herself in every sense of the word.

"You must trust me, mamma, for I cannot tell you all I have planned."

What the Princess knew was that Theodora was going to stay in a quiet little hotel in Florence, and, to avoid scandal, was changing her name.

She did not know the name of the little hotel, nor yet the name under which Theodora was disguising her identity.

Nor did she know that Theodora was going, not as a "paying guest," but as a companion to an old invalid English lady staying in this little hotel.

"I will write to you as soon as I am settled, and perhaps later on you will join me."

"But when are you coming back to George?"

"Never!" was the answer from the firm young wilful lips.

"Oh, but it's madness!" burst from the agonised mother. "It is ruining your whole life, and George's. Don't you see, Theodora, that after such an extraordinary deliberate step, George may well refuse to let you return to him, and is almost certain to do so."

"But that is just what I would wish," said Theodora, angrily. "I wish it so. George has shown me quite plainly that he almost hates me. He did love me once, but it was a love that could not stand much strain upon it," and she laughed bitterly. "As soon as he found that I had a will of my own, and would not do exactly what he wanted and tell him exactly what he wanted to know, he completely changed to me, and day by day I had the misery to endure of seeing his coldness grow into absolute dislike."

"I cannot in the least understand it," said the Princess, miserably.

"Neither can I," said Theodora. And then she added sadly, "But, after all, I deserve it. It is only my just punishment. I married George for his money. Why should I expect happiness? Why should I expect to have his love? And why"—she broke off in a strain of forced gaiety that somehow made her mother's heart wince with pain for her—"why should I mind when I don't get it? And so I'm going away. Later on, this step of mine may lead to a complete separation. It will, of course, prove unmistakably to both George and myself what our feelings are respecting each other. He will smile with pleasure when he finds I am gone."

Ah, how little she guessed what would really happen when George found she had left him!

How far she was from dreaming that he was going to be forced to read in her disappearance a tacit confession of her guilty theft of the stolen airship's plans, for which the police had come to search her boudoir, and particularly her dressing-bag, acting on information which Marcel Fleur had received privately.

How absolutely and terribly she was at sea when she uttered those words, "He will smile with pleasure when he knows that I have gone!" Instead, he had taken her supposed guilt on his shoulders, and in her place, to keep her honour fair and unspotted, had gone to the cells.

Theodora remained at Pietra Santa for three days, resting quietly till her disappearance from Paris could not be made to coincide with her appearance in Florence.

During that time it was inevitable that she should see more of the Australian, William East. They were the only English-speaking people in this little ancient city that looked across the blue plain of the Mediterranean.

She understood now why she had been instantly and curiously drawn towards this man. It was because he reminded her of George.

He was of the same stature, a big, broad-shouldered man, who wore a loose kind of grey suit such as George was particularly fond of. He was fair and bronzed. His eyes were grey and steady, with the peculiar straight, almost hard, glance that characterised George's eyes. And the same expression of deep human kindness was there, making every one feel, at the first look, absolute confidence and liking for the man, just as they felt when they saw George.

Theodora found herself talking to him as to a brother. His attitude was charming. It was that of the average Australian, who looks on womankind in general as his sisters, to be protected and treated with simple kindly friendliness. He is a being not run after by women, in spite of his good looks and splendid manliness. On the contrary! For in his country there are so many men, that to an Australian woman a man can never represent the same thing as he represents to the average English girl—some one to be captured and married. No! The Australian woman looks upon mankind as her comrades until she chooses to transform one of them into her husband. Theodora wandered into the cathedral with William East, and they looked together at the wonderful marble pulpit and its staircase, and roamed about, enchanted at all the exquisite things they saw there, especially that wealth of incomparable carvings in marble that decorates the walls, with the banner of the Medici floating high above. They explored the olive-coloured hills behind the city, and climbed, by purest marble steps, upwards to the great overhanging fortress that frowns down over Pietra Santa. They sat on the enormous yellow wall, on the top of which grew great fig trees and almonds, and they looked out together over the vast expanse of green plains,

blue sea, and purple mountains shimmering away in beautiful bright sunlight.

"Where is Paris?" a little voice seemed to whisper in Theodora's brain.

She really could scarcely answer. It appeared to her as if Paris and all the life there had suddenly faded right away, and was nothing more real than a dream.

A dream! Only that! But dreams return to haunt one sometimes.

It was chiefly the reaction, after all the stress and suffering of the last few weeks, that was causing her to feel so intensely peaceful and happy here in Pietra Santa. She was far from every one. Yet she was not lonely. Her brain seemed able to fly again with all its old lightness and brightness. She was free from that ghastly nightmare—that ugly pain of watching George's eyes looking at her with colder and colder politeness day after day.

She saw no newspapers, and remained in blankest ignorance of the terrible catastrophe that had fallen on her home and her husband.

"Miss Wood, what are you thinking of all this long time?" demanded William East, after he had watched her for some moments in silence.

She started. She was not accustomed yet to the name, and it struck her with surprise. But she *must* grow accustomed to it. It would not do to be astonished. She looked up at him and smiled.

"I was thinking of all sorts of stupid things," she answered vaguely.

Her eyes fell on her ringless hand, and it almost seemed to her as if East must notice the strangeness of that finger without the wedding ring.

She wondered what he thought. Surely it must have occurred to him that it was a little extraordinary for her to come to Pietra Santa and have her hair cut off first thing, then buy simple village clothes and dress accordingly to avoid attention.

As if he had read her thoughts just then, he said to her—

"I hope you won't think it awful cheek—what I am going to say to you. Perhaps it is. If so, I can only hope that you'll forgive me, and understand that I'm not speaking out of idle curiosity, or anything of that sort. Yet I confess I am curious about you, Miss Wood. But how can I be otherwise? And yet I suppose that's just the way with tourists like you and me, who meet in out-of-the-way places accidentally and know nothing whatever of each other."

"But that's the charm of it," interrupted Theodora, quickly. "It is quite true that we know nothing of each other—you and I—but then that isn't necessary, is it? I'm just a woman, working for her living, who has come to Pietra Santa to have a little rest. You are a travelling Australian. And we're staying in the same hotel. And by accident we spoke to each other. And afterwards we found ourselves equally enthusiastic over this most lovely of little old-world cities. And——" she paused and laughed gaily, her old bright irresistible laugh that struck her strangely, it was so long since she had heard it. "Well, isn't that enough?" she ended.

"I don't know," answered East, gravely.

He was drinking in the mobile loveliness of her face framed under the great spreading fig tree, and for a moment he remained silent after he had spoken. Theodora turned to look at him. Then she started. She had seen right into his eyes, and deep within their grave depths was an expression that made her heart beat suddenly, hard and painfully. She caught her breath. She looked away quickly across the Mediterranean. He had looked so extraordinarily like George at that moment!

Just so had George looked at her many a time in days gone by. She trembled, and the colour went slowly out of her cheeks. She sat still, her hands clasped, staring straight out before her.

She was unable to speak for a moment.

"I would just like to say one thing," said East, noting immediately the cloud that had fallen over her face. "I hope it isn't presumptuous; it's just this. If ever you want a friend—I mean to say a pal, a comrade, someone to do you a good turn—I hope you'll let me know."

"You are very good," said Theodora, touched by the ring of genuine kindliness in his deep voice and quiet eyes.

"Will you promise me?"

"Oh, I don't know about promise," she said, endeavouring to turn their conversation to a lighter vein. "It isn't so serious as all that, and I hope it never will be."

"I hope not," said East, still seriously. "But in case it is, may I give you my address?" He took a card from his pocket-book.

His address was inscribed upon it: William East, Bank of New Holland, Queen Victoria-street, London.

"That's my bank address," he said. "That will always find me, no matter where I am. I wander about a good deal. But I suppose I shall settle down one of these days."

He took out his pipe and began to fill it. Theodora watched him. That was like George too, she thought, his way of filling his pipe.

"My mother and I have been travelling about now for the last two years, seeing Europe, and for myself I confess I'm beginning to get a bit tired of it."

"You're homesick," suggested Theodora, gently.

"I want a home, perhaps," he said thoughtfully, still intent upon his pipe. Then he went on in his slow and rather drawling voice, "I should have had one long ago if fate hadn't played me a cruel trick. It took away the girl I cared for. She died."

There was a long silence. Theodora could think of nothing to say. That simple statement, "She

died," opened up before her such an appalling vista of loneliness and misery that she grew speechless before it.

"And not an ordinary death either," went on East, as if thinking aloud to himself. "The fates weren't satisfied in taking her from me, but they must do it in a most cruel and sensational way. The terrible bubonic plague broke out in Sydney. She caught it, and that was the end."

"I am so sorry," burst from Theodora's lips, and before she knew what she was doing she had turned and put her hand on his, for it seemed to her that a wave of her own suffering had mixed and mingled indistinguishably with the pain of this quiet man beside her.

He started at her touch, and laid his hand over hers for a moment.

"Promise me," he said, going back strangely to his request of a few moments ago.

"I can't promise," said Theodora, sadly; "I've had rather an unhappy experience in my life through making rash promises; but I'll just thank you very, very much. And I'll certainly remember."

"All right," he said gently, "that's all that I can ask."

They rose and strolled away from the Rocca. Wending their way down the hill under the olives, they paused every now and then to pick the creamy-white Christmas roses that spread their fragile loveliness over the slopes. Nothing more was said, and the next day they parted.

East asked her a little shyly if she would not let him know her address. But she shook her head and said—

"I'm going to work for my living, and I'm afraid I should not be able to see you, even if by chance we did happen ever to be in the same city again." She looked up into his eyes with a strange, appealing expression. He smiled down at her.

"I understand that look," he said, nodding. "You can trust me," and then half-humorously, half-sadly, he added, "I'm not a cad, and I know it's my duty to forget that I saw you having that beautiful hair cut off, and assuming the garb of a village maiden here in Pietra Santa. You can trust me never to speak of it."

He left in the morning for Pisa, and on the evening of the same day Theodora departed for Florence.

Night had fallen over the mountains and the dreamy plains as her train came creeping, creeping, down into the vast and lovely valley of the Arno. Far away, in the distance, she saw the lights of Florence gleaming as the beautiful city came nearer and nearer.

What should she find there, she wondered? What lay in store for her in the future? Her heart still remained strangely light, and never the slightest premonition crossed her mind of the state of things in Paris. The train came panting and groaning into the station, and she saw with a joyful recognition the white face of the inimitable Campanile of Giotto gleaming high up in the light that fell upon it from the Piazza del Duomo; and the great dome of the cathedral was vaguely seen beyond it. Her ardent love of architecture thrilled within her at the sight.

"I am going to be happy here!" she said to herself.

The doors were opened, and she stepped out upon the platform, overwhelmed for the first few moments before the indescribable deafening babel of voices and the excited cries and gestures of the crowd of blue-bloused *facchini*, or porters.

"*Facchino! Facchino!*" was heard on all sides.

She raised her voice and uttered the same cry, but it died away on her lips suddenly.

Two people were coming towards her, pronouncing her name, "Miss Margaret Wood." The little old lady in black, with a gentle face framed under a simple old-world bonnet, was holding out her hand

while beside her a tall, broad-shouldered man in grey was smiling also, and exclaiming "Miss Margaret Wood" in a slightly different tone.

Theodora was dazed. Was she dreaming, or was that man beside her really William East?

As if he read her thoughts he bent towards her, and said rapidly—

"This is my mother—Mrs. Ellerton. I am the son of her first marriage. I only heard your name when I came back here this evening, and I knew it must be you. So I came with her to meet you—to welcome you." He added softly, "My mother is deaf, and cannot hear what I'm saying. Remember, you can trust me!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

OLD Ivan and Armand Roche, the journalist (and for the moment, perhaps, one of the most important men on the staff of *Le Jour*), had duly arrived in Florence after a somewhat tedious journey. They had taken the route via Mont Cenis, as being the easiest one at this desired moment of departure, and Monsieur Roche had not found it particularly interesting ; but, all the same, the delight of old Ivan was almost pathetic to witness, as he at last realised that he had crossed the frontier and left Paris and France far behind, and with them the load of care and worry he had felt weighing upon his bent old shoulders during the long, long months before his kind friend Armand Roche had taken pity on him and cared for him so well.

As the train rumbled and jolted along the coast, through the numerous small tunnels that gave such tantalising glimpses of gorgeous blue sea breaking in feathery foam over the blue-green rocks, he was as delighted as a little child. For him the journey was enthralling. He did not mind the dirt or dust, or the lateness of their train. He was out of France, away—far from Marcel Fleur, whom he vaguely hated, for his illness had not left his mind quite clear as to why he disliked him ; far from airships and machinery that one invented and got no credit for. Far from poverty and discomfort, too, he thought, as he felt the soft cushions of the wide first-class carriage, in which he sat wrapped in rugs.

How good this new friend was to him ! He felt too

contented and weak even to wonder if there could possibly be any motive in his kindness. And, anyway, it did not matter much. He was only a poor, helpless old man, and not of much good or use to any one. Therefore his friend's kindness must, he felt, be disinterested.

They had secured charming rooms in an hotel overlooking the Arno, and there in the golden rays of the wintry sunlight Ivan was sitting, silently enjoying the view, and looking across the water at the quaint old yellow houses and palaces reflected in the flowing river. He felt supremely happy in his quiet way, and asked nothing more than to be allowed to sit there day by day, in his warm room, reading by the fire, or watching the light play across the stream upon those wonderful old yellow palaces which seemed to prop each other up for fear of falling into the Arno, as their stone walls adventurously hung over its edge.

It was late in the afternoon, and Ivan was enjoying a cup of his own Russian tea by the window, and nibbling one of those inimitable little Florentine cakes—for he still had a sweet tooth, even in his old age—when Armand Roche knocked at his door, and then entered smilingly.

The old man turned, and stretched out a hand to his friend with a muttered blessing in his native tongue.

"What are you calling me?" asked the younger man, affectionately patting the withered old hand, whose cunning fingers even yet knew how to fashion and combine the wondrous secret parts of his aeroplane.

The journalist had indeed acquired a real affection for this poor lonely man, whom, at first, he had got under his control for his own ends and those of *Le Jour*. He had always been kind to him; at first out of policy, and because those were his orders from his chief, but afterwards on account of the real and lasting admiration he had conceived both for his honest simple character and his extraordinary genius.

Latterly it had been a real pleasure to him to wait upon and tend old Ivan, and he had watched and looked after him as if he had been his own father. He saw that Ivan wanted for nothing. The best rooms that the hotel could provide were at his disposal. His food was of the best, better, in fact, than he had ever tasted in all his life. All that kindness and money could do was being done for him.

The old man did not reply to his friend's question, except by pointing out over the water in admiration, as he drew his companion's attention to the red rays of the early setting January sun upon the houses.

"I am so happy here," he said at last, "and I have only you to thank."

Armand Roche for a moment was smitten with some qualms of conscience, but his quick Gallic temperament soon drove these away, as he explained to himself, half-humorously, that, in the main, the words were perfectly true.

"Shall we not go out?" he asked. But Ivan shook his head. He wanted to rest quietly there until dinner time.

"Well, let us go out to-night to dinner to some nice restaurant. It will be more amusing than dining in the hotel, and it is not cold to-night."

The old man assented. He loved a little jaunt; his life had been so singularly free from even the most harmless amusements, and these little dinners and lunches pleased him as much as if he had been a schoolboy.

Armand Roche did not stop long talking to him. The old man was in one of his silent moods, as Armand perceived, and was quite content to remain there alone; but he settled him carefully in a comfortable chair by the log fire, with his papers and writing materials close to hand, and saw that he needed nothing before he left.

Then he wandered out to the Lung' Arno, past the brilliantly lighted little shops with their strange

mixture of beautiful old things and terrible new ones. He gazed into the little windows with the other strangers, interestedly, and avoided, with them, the furiously driven and ramshackle cabs, which always seem uncertain whether they wish to drive on the road or the path, and appear to take a delight in terrifying the pedestrians who may be walking along by the parapet of the river till they scowl and stand aside, flattening themselves against the wall.

Monsieur Roche wandered idly on to the Ponte Vecchio. The night was cold, but brilliantly fine, and there were many people out. Tourists, English and American residents, *contadini* selling cakes and trinkets, the usual Italian boys flying recklessly round corners on bicycles, a jumble of carriages and country carts — all the habitual delights and picturesque muddle which always characterise the Ponte Vecchio and the surrounding streets.

Suddenly a form hurrying by him caught the attention of Armand Roche. It was a woman, and he thought he recognised her. Where had he seen her before? Who was she?

He turned quickly, and retracing his steps, followed her. There was something in the graceful poise of the tall, slim figure, something in the colouring of the red-gold hair escaping from under the closely drawn veil which reminded him vaguely of some one he had known, or of some one who was well known.

Yes, that was it, he thought. Some one who was well known to the world. An actress. A singer. He could not recall her.

But in a moment he laughed at his idea. That could not be a well-known or famous person of the kind of which he was thinking. The girl was evidently poor. She was simply, almost meanly dressed in a plain black coat, none too thick for the weather either, and a short serviceable tweed skirt, evidently an Italian costume.

Her face was closely veiled. He could tell that from the back of her simple hat from which the thick folds of a black veil were hanging.

He hesitated.

Then his wonderful memory for people, his infallible memory, as he so often boastingly called it, had failed him for once. But no! There was something familiar in the walk and carriage of that girl in front of him. He would catch her up and try to see her face.

It would not be a difficult matter to pass her quickly and turn again after a few steps so as to face her. He lost no time in putting this plan into action. He turned and faced her. Through her veil he saw her vivid eyes and lips, beautiful as ever.

In a flash he knew the woman whom he was gazing at open-mouthed and amazed. It was Lady Allingham.

There could be no doubt of it. He had seen her too often to be mistaken. Besides, he never made mistakes. But how changed, he thought. Why had she done that to her hair? And why those clothes?

A disguise, evidently. But a disguise that was no disguise.

In a second he had made up his mind. He was a journalist before everything. This was a lucky chance for him. Once more fortune seemed to be smiling upon him. Here was Lady Allingham, the Lady Allingham of whom rumour said so many things in Paris! She was here in Florence, while her husband lay in a Paris gaol. He knew that she was not at her house in Paris. It had been given out that she was staying with friends in the country, and until rumour had sent its evil tongue abroad, no one had thought of disputing it. But queer things were being said, and more than one person in society had asked outright: "Where is Lady Allingham? And there had been no answer.

Every one now said that she had run away, and it seemed true; for here she was, badly disguised, and

worse dressed, he thought, with a Frenchman's utter contempt for ill-fitting clothes. All this flashed through his agile brain. Quickly he turned to her.

"I beg your pardon, Lady Allingham, for stopping you," he said, "but I find myself most fortunate to meet you here——"

She had stopped, and was looking at him with wide-open eyes; in terror for a moment it was evident. But she recovered herself immediately, and, though her face was blanched, looked calmly at him.

"I represent *Le Jour*," he went on with almost impertinent persistence. "Would you not give me a few moments' conversation, please, and perhaps a few details concerning the situation? You will remember, doubtless, that we can be of the greatest use to your husband."

He ceased, for the girl was staring at him coldly and calmly.

"I do not know in the least what you are talking about, sir, nor have I ever heard of Lady Allingham," she said, staring above his head and moving away with dignity, just as a tall young man, irreproachably dressed, and as M. Roche thought, apparently English, came up and addressed her in her own language.

The girl seemed delighted to see him; they were evidently friends, for no formal salutation passed between them.

The journalist wondered if he had heard the last few words. He did not think so, for he had not noticed the young man in his haste to carry out the little manœuvre by which he had run his quarry down. But he was mistaken. East had been looking in a shop-window near by, and had overheard all, and as he scornfully glared at this unknown man, his glance might have told the journalist that he believed his story to have been a mere pretext to speak to the lady.

M. Roche was taken aback, but he was not abashed. He was certain now that it was she. What

a find! He must follow her. But while he had paused she had slipped quickly down one of the little turnings and had been swallowed up in the dark shadows thrown by the great overhanging palaces.

It was annoying, but it could not be helped, he thought. Florence was only a small place. He would say nothing, and keep his eyes well open. Thoughtfully, his mind full of suppositions and a tangle of suggestions and ideas, he returned to the hotel.

It was nearing dinner time, and he went in and gently roused Ivan, who had fallen asleep by the warm fire. The old man raised his head and smiled his slow, sweet smile. Dinner? Yes, he would get ready, and they would go out. The air would do him good. How kind his friend was! It was so seldom that the young men of the present day took much or any trouble about the old—a tale that may probably be told of every generation since the world began, the sole difference being, that nowadays, the younger generations are probably much better in this way than their fathers were before them.

About half an hour afterwards, well wrapped up and laughing and talking, they set out for the restaurant through the narrow, quaint streets, past the churches and great palaces, looking huge in the artificial light, and through the great modern Piazza Vittorio Emanuele, with its innumerable brilliantly lighted *cafés*, and mixed crowd of soldiers and civilians.

They turned down the Via Calzaioli, and entered the Restaurant Mellini.

At the door Ivan stopped. He had forgotten to get his beloved papers. He must go back and buy them. He would be miserable without them, he pleaded. Armand would go in and secure a table; he would only be a minute or two.

The old man had his way, and went slowly out again, up the street to his paper stall, and Armand

Roche walked down the restaurant towards the jovial and smiling proprietor. He asked him for a table.

"Si, signore. It is very full to-night, but I have always room for my customers," said he politely. "I will find you a table instantly. See, there is one vacant over there, next the round table with all the English ladies and gentlemen at it."

M. Roche went across the room and took possession of the little table, looking around him as he did so. His eyes fixed upon the round table, at which seven or eight English people were just beginning dinner. They did not interest him much until he recognised with a start the young man who had spoken to Lady Allingham just an hour or more ago.

He hurriedly examined the others of the party, and to his amazement saw again the lady of the afternoon's adventure. He scrutinised her closely. She had changed her dress and hat, but was still both cheaply and untastefully dressed. Her veil was lifted now, and there was no mistaking her face.

"She is Lady Allingham," he said to himself. "This begins to get interesting. I think I shall telegraph to the office after dinner."

Certainly *Le Jour* would have liked to know that the wife of the most-talked-of man in Paris had been run to earth in Florence, and until there was some definite news or some exciting detail to give a guarded reference would be interesting and mystifying to its readers; and as usual, *Le Jour* would "know," and its "faithful readers," too, should know, and when the right moment came *Le Jour* would tell all that they "had always known."

Armand Roche mused as he watched her. She wore no rings, not even her wedding ring. That was the most striking point about the disguise. Her face was as beautiful as ever, perhaps even more lovely than before, for suffering had lent her expression a depth and charm which had been lacking.

The violet eyes looked sad and tired, it was true, and the white face had lost a little of its roundness, but still she looked wonderfully beautiful. Not even the short cropped hair could change that. It added to it, in fact, he decided.

He noticed the nervous movements of the thin white fingers, playing with a simple little gold chain upon which hung a little gold cross around her neck, and once again he told himself that there could be no possible doubt but that this was she. She looked up. She caught the fixed, penetrating glance levelled at her from the neighbouring table. She started, half in fear, half in annoyance.

She glanced at his table. It was laid for two, and she could hear him speaking to the waiter, telling him that another gentleman was coming. Perhaps, he, too, would know her! She became terrified. She should have refused to come to this informal little dinner party, and kept to her resolution never to dine out! A panic seized her. Anyone might see her and recognise her here! She must go!

Hurriedly she rose, pushing back her chair.

"I must go home," she said, in a low voice to William, who looked at her in consternation. "I am ill and feel faint. Get me away. Quickly——"

With a few murmured words of apology she left the table, accompanied by the big Australian. They walked quickly down through the rooms to the door.

"Get me a cab, please, and I will go home alone. I shall be all right. You go back and finish your dinner," she said.

"I shall do nothing of the sort," he replied, almost angrily.

They had just reached the entrance of the restaurant when the doors opened, and old Ivan walked slowly in and came immediately face to face with her.

CHAPTER XXXV

THEY stood face to face in the doorway of the gay, glittering Florentine *café*—Ivan and Theodora. The old man trembled, then uttered a loud cry.

"It is she! Lady Allingham!"

He seized her hand, and kissed it wildly, his old, blue eyes filling with quick, emotional tears at the sight of the dear familiar face and figure of his "Princess's little one."

Theodora turned very pale. East was beside her. He heard. He saw. What on earth would he think? And how would he act?

She drew away her hand. "Hush! Hush, Ivan! I beg you not to make a scene here," she said rapidly, in the language of their own country.

"But don't go! Oh, don't leave me!" cried Ivan, imploringly.

"I must."

East was motionless as a statue beside her. Not a word did he utter. Yet Theodora felt an immense sense of security and protection in his mere presence there, and gathering herself up bravely, she leaned over Ivan and whispered—

"Tell nobody you have seen me. Do not mention it to any living soul, as you love me, Ivan. It is a matter of the greatest importance to me, do you understand? And you, what are you doing here? Whom are you with?"

His answer stunned her.

"I am here with Monsieur Armand Roche," he said; "a good friend to old Ivan. He waits me now

inside there, where we dine together presently. Ah, see! There he comes. He is walking down the restaurant now."

Theodora's head swam. She put out her hand blindly towards East, who was watching her intently.

"Get me away, quickly. A carriage—quickly," she gasped.

In one second, it seemed, East had almost lifted her into a carriage that stood at the door. Then he paused just for one brief breathing space. He spoke to the porter at the doorway and pressed gold into his hand.

"Pay the other coachmen about here .not to follow us, or, at any rate, to delay," he said rapidly, and jumped in beside Theodora. They were off. The loud crack of the fat old driver's whip from the high front seat resounded high and cheerfully above all the other cracking whips in the crowded, narrow, merry Via Calzaioli as the Florentine *élégants* went dashing along in their beloved carrozze to dine on their equally well-beloved riso, vitello, and the inimitable red wines of Tuscany.

"And where does the signore wish that we go?" asked the driver, turning his head, but never pausing a moment in his wild career along the crowded streets, where pedestrians are obliged to take good care of themselves, for the one who is run over is the one who has to pay the damages in Italy!

"Drive in and out all over the place for some time, and eventually put us down in a little back street quite near the Hôtel de la Ville," said East, immediately.

"*Benissimo.* Very well," came the cheerful response.

He was not a Florentine for nothing, that fat old Borea Luigi, with his top hat and the enormous whip which he never stopped cracking. He had understood perfectly from the moment East lifted Theodora into the carriage. This was an adventure. They were escaping some one, these two Inglesi. He

would see that they were not caught up. One glance had told him with the extraordinary, incomprehensible swiftness and subtlety of the Florentine that the signore there was a very rich man, and that he would do anything on earth for that beautiful, white-faced lady with the heavenly eye and elegant figure. There was money in this, thought Luigi, contentedly.

On and on he drove, and always where the crowd was densest.

Armand Roche in another carriage was searching vainly for them, quite unconscious that his own man had been paid not to succeed in the pursuit and had been told that the other gentleman was far richer than this one.

They crossed the Ponte Vecchio, and the moon was seen rising over the yellow old river, and shining far and wide on the great white valley, and the snow that powdered so softly the distant purple mountains; they dashed past the Pitti Palace, with its wonderful treasures, where the Count of Turin has his home when in Florence; they passed Casa Guidi, where the Brownings lived, and a street lamp shone on the marble memorial over the door saying, in lovely Italian words, that here had lived the poetess who drew a golden ring round Italy and England; they made a long passage down an endless narrow back street, full of wine-shops, picture-framers', and jewellers'. And then they recrossed the river by the Ponte S. Trinita, and, dashing down Via Parione, stopped some short distance away from the Hôtel de la Ville.

"Signore, we are safe. We are not followed," said Luigi, dramatically, breaking into flowery and picturesque thanks at the gold that East had pressed into his long brown hand.

In silence East and Theodora entered the hotel and made their way up to the magnificent apartments of Mrs. Ellerton overlooking the river.

Theodora sank into a chair and leaned her head

back against a cushion. They were alone. The old lady had retired to her bedroom, for she had not been one of the party to-night, though she had insisted on Theodora going.

"It was very good of you," said Theodora at last, breaking the breathless silence that seemed to surround them.

"We pulled it off, anyway," said East, with a little laugh.

He stood in front of her, watching her as she lay back there in the big chair with the light from the rose-shaded lamps casting a soft glow over the unnatural whiteness of her face, and making her look more than ordinarily beautiful in this moment of helplessness and distress. All East's manhood was stirred at the sight of her, this lovely girl, who had evidently some great mystery surrounding her. What could it be? Of one thing he was absolutely certain. He would have staked his life upon it. She had done no wrong. She was incapable of wrong-doing, this girl. He was sure of it. He was so sure of it, in fact, that it delighted him to see his mother in her company, the greatest proof a man can give of his belief in a woman's goodness.

"We were too quick for them," he added, unconscious of the tender note that had crept into his voice. "And what's the next step to be?" he asked, drawing a chair forward and sitting down in front of her.

"The next step must be that I go from here immediately," said Theodora.

"Immediately!" He echoed the word blankly.

"Yes—yes, to-night," she replied. "This very night if possible."

If her words were a blow to him he gave no sign. He sat and looked at her quietly, giving her the impression that he was using all his powers of thought and energy on her behalf to help her out of this difficulty, whatever it was.

"You can't go to-night, Miss Wood," he said gravely. "I fear that's out of the question. But look here," he said in his Australian way, "you've had nothing to eat but one anchovy, and this will never do. That wretched interruption to your dinner mustn't be allowed to unfit you physically before you set out on another journey. You must eat, my child, you must eat."

He jumped up and rang the bell, and when the waiter appeared, he ordered dinner for two to be served there immediately. Soup—chicken—salad—champagne—*subitissimo*—very quickly.

"*Subitissimo*," echoed the waiter, and a few moments later the dinner arrived.

In spite of Theodora's protest she was made to eat whether she would or not.

He treated her like a little girl, this big man, and she wholly liked the sensation.

What was there about that was so familiar, so sweet? A soothingness seemed to come over the world with all its fret, and care, and strife, and confusion, and distress. A magic wand seemed to be stretching out and moving everything away. It was East. The kindly spirit in this big man was making itself felt and carrying comfort to her heart. He poured out champagne for her, and smilingly bade her drink it.

"Then the world will look different a bit," he said gaily.

She roused herself. "You are extraordinarily good to me," she said, "and I feel so horrid. I would like to make a confidant of you. I so absolutely trust you."

"That's good," said East, laconically.

"But I can't confide in you," she added pathetically.

"It isn't necessary."

He looked after her in silence for a few moments, seeing that she really ate something and did not

merely play with her food. And all the while he was thinking—thinking. She wanted to escape detection. That was it. She must get away. Evidently it was dangerous for her to stay in Florence. She was not Margaret Wood. She was a lady with a title. He had not quite caught the name that she had been addressed by, but he heard them call her "Lady" some one or other. She had run away from home. That was it. Well, he was going to stand by her. In his own words, he was going to see her through. He got up and gave himself a great shake, and came and stood beside her, looking down on her with a kind and brotherly expression in which was mingled also a note of something that was not altogether only brotherly.

"Listen to me a moment," he said. "There is a train to-night at eleven for the north." He was looking at his watch. "It's now half-past nine. Tell me, is it absolutely necessary that you disappear from Florence immediately?"

She looked up into his grey eyes.

"Yes," she said simply; "otherwise I run a risk, a risk that I do not wish to run. Two people to-day have seen me. They know I am here. One of them is a terribly sharp, acute Frenchman, a most up-to-date Parisian, and a journalist too. He'll leave no stone unturned to find me. In fact, I am absolutely certain that he will find me unless I go at once."

He nodded.

"I see," he said reflectively, his eyes intent upon her lovely face. "Then there is only one thing to do. We will all go immediately."

"All!"

She started at his words.

"What do you mean?" she cried, rising to her feet and standing there slim and straight and tall beside him, and looking up at him with such an appealing glance that he had to overmaster an almost overwhelming inclination to put his arms round her

and draw her towards him, though she was utterly unconscious of it.

"Yes! it's all right," he said. "My mother and I will come too. I'll telegraph at once to Innsbruck for rooms——" Then he changed his mind suddenly and said: "No, a wiser thing would be to telegraph from Verona instead of Florence, so as not to run any risk of our destination being known. We can have our letters sent to Cook's, at Vienna, and then re-forwarded down to us. Not a soul in Florence need know where we've gone. The only thing is we have very little time to dress, pack, and catch our train."

Theodora listened in paralysed silence, scarcely believing her ears.

He touched her gently on the arm.

"Wake up," he said laughing, "there is no time to lose. I'm off to my mother to arrange with her."

"Oh, but it's impossible—impossible!" burst out Theodora at last. "How can I permit you to do all this for me? How can I ever repay you for your kindness?"

"That's all right," said East, with a little enigmatic smile.

"And how can I allow your mother—an old lady like that—to take this long and trying journey at a moment's notice in the cold of a winter's night?"

"That's all right too," he replied. "My mother's an Australian, and she won't think any more of a thing like this than if I asked her to buy me some handkerchiefs to-morrow morning at a shop."

He bent over her suddenly, and looked right into her eyes.

"Let us trust each other," he said. "I told you I would be your pal—I'm jolly glad to have had a chance of proving my words."

Then he was gone, with a last word to her to begin to pack immediately.

Was it all a dream, she thought, as she stood in her own rooms a few minutes later. The blinds were

up. She went to the window and looked out, but she scarcely knew what city it was lying there along the moving river in the silver winter moonlight. It might have been a dream city; blurred with distress and anxiety, her mind and its images had removed themselves into far distance, as sometimes happened after sleep. Was she a real woman, she thought? She stared stupidly out. Was that indeed a real city? All yellow with dust and age it lay, this Florence of the narrow streets and high houses, with the Arno stealing through it. The old houses across the river were lost in shadow, but the spire of Santo Spirito maintained its perfect outline, high up in the moonlight. There was the river going by, swollen and golden, and singing like the sea. And, rising above its song, soared voices on Lung' Arno, singing passionately into the night. Right under her window stood a tenor, whose voice thrilled and swelled with that sublime let-go that never is heard out of Italy, not even when carried out of it by opera managers. Rain began to fall, but he took no heed, though when the pennies came he would return to earth with a smile. Little carts flashed by, casting wonderful orange glows into the dark. No art could achieve anything more beautiful. Yet they were only tapers wrapped with brown paper—those exquisite mellow, half-gold, half-orange lights that crept up about the faces of the drivers of the carts, softening their features as sunset softens the world. Little wandering isles of gold, they passed up and down the night. And far, far away, down the river, beyond all the bridges, a strange last drift of red sunset faded behind the dark, dim mountains at the valley's western end towards the Cascine.

How gay Florence was to-night! Carriages dashed by, taking the dark Florentine beauties home to their palazzos. Crowds of English and Americans were out, too. Theodora watched them dazedly. Never was there such a city for beautiful hats. Dozens and dozens went by.

She flew round her room like lightning, throwing her things together recklessly, and in ten minutes she was ready, and hastened to Mrs. Ellerton's room, where the maid was already hard at work packing up.

"How can I ever thank you?" began Theodora; but the elder woman interrupted her with a smile.

"My dear," she said, "don't try; there's no need to."

She put her arms gently round the slim, graceful figure in the black travelling-dress and kissed her on each cheek.

"We may find out a way some day, Miss Wood," she whispered—"a way in which you can thank me."

"Oh, I hope so!" cried Theodora, sincerely.

Utterly unconscious was she of the significance that lay beneath the old lady's words.

At eleven o'clock that night they all set out for the Tyrol, a long journey to be taken at such short notice.

But East laughed at difficulties. Everything was perfectly arranged, and he seemed justified in making light of their impromptu travels. Rugs, foot-warmers, cushions, magazines, hampers—nothing was forgotten.

The light of the train was shining in his eyes as he turned to Theodora, who was thickly veiled and wrapped in furs of Mrs. Ellerton's which reached up almost to her eyes.

"Nobody could recognise you," he said softly. "We have done the thing in great style, haven't we? Now we're off to the Land of the Winter Sports—that's the way to look at it, isn't it?" But under his breath he added a word which she did not hear. It was a little word of four letters, often used and quite insignificant; but, somehow, he preferred to keep it back where she would not hear it. It was the word "dear."

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE love of the Count de Rigos for his handsome, dark-haired wife had increased almost daily, if such a thing were possible, during the short months of their married life. To him she had come like an angel of peace from the very first time, when, by that lucky accident, they had met at the hotel in London.

And now?

All of a sudden, in one moment, his whole happiness, the golden castle in which he had been living, appeared to be toppling once more about his ears, and, as so often happens, all through a few chance words.

The careless phrases of two gossiping servants reached him as he was walking abstractedly down the corridor that morning. They were talking of their mistress and of Mrs. Hawkins. The English girl's tone and words still rang in his head as he sat in his study, moodily gazing out of the window at the bare trees of the Avenue des Champs Elysées.

"So Mrs. Hawkins has gone, has she?" said one.

"Yes. And isn't my lady in a way. *He* sent her away first, not her. 'And and glove, that's what they were, my lady and Mrs. H. And a bad lot was the old woman, and"—in a whisper—"the Countess, too, if all my young man tells me is true of her gambling and debts and goings on at Monte Carlo before she met him and his money."

De Rigos listened spellbound, not daring to interrupt them.

"I've heard of some curious things the old cat

Hawkins 'as done," went on the other, "and *she* knew of them too. Wonder he didn't twig it all before."

"What things?"

"Oh, all sorts. I ain't one to gossip, and I keep a quiet tongue; but there's no doubt as 'ow Mrs. Hawkins and my lady have humbugged *'im* all the time——"

The voices died away as the door was closed to.

For fully two minutes De Rigos stood rooted to the spot, unable to move, even unable to think clearly.

That these servants should dare to talk thus of a mistress who was goodness itself to them did not at first strike him as peculiar, but the tone of absolute conviction and the silent acceptance of the statements by the two talkers struck him coldly and forcibly like an icy hand. So they were in the habit of discussing their mistress in this strain! The kitchen knew for a fact that the Countess de Rigos was "hand and glove" with a dreadful and abandoned old woman! That she was a gambler and had married him for his wealth! It was common property. Was it true that those sort of people saw most of the game, and always knew? That was how the society papers got their news, he thought, laughing aloud bitterly. All his former suspicions returned with a rush, and he felt for a moment that he hated her.

His mind was a prey to doubt and imagination; all his thoughts were chaos; he did not know what to think or say.

On some pretence or other he kept out all day, not knowing what to do or where to go in his misery, praying instinctively, with all the power of which he was capable, that this suspicion and pain might not turn to rage, for then he knew that he would not be able to account for his actions. The shadow of his former love still hung darkly in the background, and although he dared not look back he *felt* it there.

The absence of the Count during all that day had curiously affected his wife. Usually she seldom saw

him much before mid-day, and if, by any chance, he had been obliged to go out or stop away, she had been quite delighted at the prospect of a nice free time to herself, and she had often spent it in many little ways which would have surprised her husband, could he have seen her.

But to-day she felt a strange feeling of annoyance when she was told by her maid, in response to the request that she should ask her master to come to the boudoir after lunch, which she had alone, that he would not return until dinner time.

It was strange for him to go out and leave her without a word, and it had never happened before, never once since they had been married! What did it mean? He was always so thoughtful, surely he could not have forgotten. But he must have done so, or else she was obliged to conclude that he had purposely left her without a word.

Where had he gone, she wondered? Probably out to lunch at the club, or—but no, that was *too* stupid. Surely he could not have gone to keep an appointment with some other woman? The thought struck her strangely. It *could* not be. And yet if it were so, why not? What on earth did it matter to her? In fact, it would be better like that; she would be free, and the way would be made clear for a separation. Yes, what did she care? She was glad, rather. But her clear, evenly balanced brain refused to allow her to credit herself with this delightful solution to the problem. She looked into her own mind and analysed her feelings and sentiments critically and acutely, and found, to her horror, the opposite. She *did* care, and very much indeed, too! Her husband the slave of another woman? Never!

"Ah, but this is jealousy," she murmured aloud, in open amazement at herself. "I jealous! Good Heaven, it's too absurd! I, too, must be going mad even to imagine such a thing of myself for one moment."

But she could not deceive herself, as she had done so many others often and easily. The fact remained, as if it had been branded upon her brain with a red-hot iron. She was jealous of her husband, and now she was almost certain that he had gone to see some other beautiful woman.

The thought was too much for her, and she rose abruptly and paced the room. The idea that at that very moment her husband might be looking into another woman's eyes and making her his confidante overwhelmed her.

As for herself, she pondered, she might be jealous, but that did not mean anything. Lots of people were jealous of their own property, and he was hers. It did not follow that it meant love for him; far from it.

And yet her clear-working brain refused once more to accept this decision. She almost believed that she really loved him. But it would be too silly, she told herself. Yet it would be sweet, too, whispered a voice within her.

Sweet? What a word to use in conjunction with *her* feelings! As a rule they were far from sweet, even when she spoke, most charmingly, the most loving words in her carefully studied vocabulary and took his hand as she uttered the beautiful little phrases.

She laughed aloud. Did she love him? Love! Why, what was that?

"Am I going to fall a victim in my old age?" she cried mockingly. "It's too absurd!"

She rose again, and went swiftly into her dressing-room, summoning her maid as she did so.

"I will dress early to-night," she said. "I want to try the effect of that new frock with my sapphires."

The maid was delighted. She was an artist by nature in all things appertaining to the toilette, and of late her mistress had seemed strangely cold, or else preoccupied and uninterested in what she was wearing.

She unpacked the great box which had arrived a few hours ago from a world-famous *couturière*, and

drew out carefully from its many wrappings of tissue paper the exquisite shimmering gown of pale blue shading into deepest purple. The lovely fairy-like texture and the clever daintiness of the glittering folds drew forth exclamations of delight both from the Countess and her maid, and as the former stood before her mirror some moments later arrayed in the gorgeous frock with its perfectly cut sheath-like lines falling from her slim, rounded form in a wonderful shimmer of silk and diamond-strewn lace, she even forgot her troubles for a time in the contemplation of herself, for the picture was undoubtedly beautiful. The tones of the gown showed the dark hair and pale oval face in strange combination. A delicate flush was overspreading her cheeks, and the deep, dark eyes glowed like stars. The gown was cut low, for the artist who had created it had not failed to take advantage of the beautiful shoulders and figure of his client.

"I think that will do," murmured the Countess, as she turned away smilingly and made her way out of the room towards her husband's study, having heard that he had come in.

She knocked gently at the door, her heart beating wildly with excitement, and entered slowly.

The room was in darkness save for the flames of a huge fire by which the Count was sitting with a book idly in his hands.

He raised his head and looked at her as she swept gracefully across the room. The firelight caught the sparkle of the diamonds and the shimmer of her frock as she trailed its undulating folds across the thick rugs.

He could not help thinking how lovely she looked, and sadly he tried for a moment to reconcile her frank and charming smile with the deceit and treachery which he feared were within her heart.

"All in the dark, dearest," she exclaimed softly, in her musical tones. "How charming it is in here! I have dressed early to have a little chat with you."

"It is very kind of you," he answered, almost coldly. The tone of his voice struck her to the heart.

Artifice and wiles no longer stood her in good stead.

She tried to gather herself together, and made one of her old, sweetly-worded speeches in the old way about holding out the hand of hope to those whom only a good woman could comfort.

De Rigos laughed aloud.

"Our conversation is getting so artificial," he said, switching on the lights, "that we need artificial light, I think, to continue it."

CHAPTER XXXVII

As the dawn broke over sleeping Paris, arousing the early, hard-working shop-people, and once more letting loose the early morning traffic to rumble through the rough-paved side streets and rattle over the great boulevards, the Countess de Rigos fell into a restless slumber. Her wakeful night, following on the troubled events of the day, had exhausted her, and nature asserted herself, causing her to sleep, and—for an hour or two at least—be free from the maddening thoughts which haunted her waking hours.

But this merciful repose was not to last long. Towards nine o'clock she woke, as her maid entered softly to draw back the blinds and bring to the bedside the little tray bearing an exquisite service of Sèvres in which the Countess's morning chocolate was always served.

The maid expressed herself in sympathetic and concerned accents when she saw her mistress's face.

"But my lady has not slept well! She is ill?"

"No, no. I am quite well, only a little tired," replied the Countess hastily, for the idea of sympathy was repugnant to her strong, self-reliant nature. She drank the delicious chocolate slowly, thinking hard all the time.

A little of her wonted courage began to return to her.

She felt that she must rise to meet this new and, as yet, inexperienced situation; just as she had met and conquered others of a different kind before it, so must she fight this one boldly and courageously. One

never gained anything yet by sitting still, she told herself, and, with a rather more cheerful feeling, she rose, and, aided by her maid, began the mysteries of her toilet. Her face looked white and drawn as she gazed into the mirror while the clever fingers of her maid put the final touches to her magnificent dark hair, but a few artistic little effects soon remedied that, and as she slipped into an exquisite house gown of *bois-de-rose* chiffon velvet, the clinging skirt draped with slightly upward curving draperies, the bodice of delicate old lace over slurred rose chiffon, she looked almost her old self. The delighted little exclamation of her maid, who adored her, told her so.

The Count met her in the hall. She supposed that he had been out, as he was wearing a fur coat.

He addressed her with his usual unfailing politeness, asking her to come into the library.

Silently she acquiesced, and followed him almost humbly into the luxurious room, which for her had now none but bitter memories. She glanced round and shivered. How often she and Ignace had sat side by side on the low settee by the fire, beguiling the hours away with long confidential talks, in which, be it said, her confidences were not unfrequently matters of her own imagination, for even in their most intimate moments she had always had to act a part to him. He closed the door after her now, and turned and looked at her with a rather peculiar glance.

"I am glad I met you," said he, quietly. "I was just going to leave a note for you, as I did not wish to disturb you. I am leaving directly for the Riviera. I am going to Monte Carlo. I feel I want a change. The cold of Paris," he added bitterly, "the atmosphere of this house, does not suit me. I am feeling ill."

"You are feeling ill?" exclaimed his wife, her face lighting up with genuine concern. "Oh, but——"

"You need not concern yourself about me, thank you," interrupted the Count, coldly. "I shall be

perfectly right soon. It is merely a little passing indisposition, and is of no consequence whatever."

His words cut her to the heart.

Their meaning was only too obvious. Bluntly, they meant that his actions or feelings were no longer any business of hers.

He had done with her!

But she felt that this was no moment for words. He was a man; he must be allowed to go his own way. Meanwhile, she would think out something. Surely she could: some means by which she could win him back and reinstate herself in his affections. Her wits had never failed her yet, and they should not now.

But the Countess de Rigos was in deep and unaccustomed waters. The tactics which had enabled her to battle with and overcome apparently insurmountable objects were almost useless as weapons to fight in the cause of love. She was far too clever a woman not to realise this in the back of her mind, but her emotions forced her to try. She must, at least, make an attempt to gain her ends.

Her husband had moved away, and was putting some letters together at his bureau, preparatory to locking them up. He did not come over to her and kiss her in response to her softly murmured accents of farewell, merely responding by a few half-jesting words about his coming back soon, which relaxed a little the tension of a very uncomfortable moment. The Countess, who never lost her head in any situation, took her tone from him, and, nodding brightly, albeit her smile was strained had he seen it, prepared to leave the room silently, when his words arrested her.

"There is something I want to find out at Monte Carlo—several things—as much as I can, in fact. You have been there often, I believe! Is it not so?"

"I! Oh yes—yes, certainly. Often," she replied.

Not until the moment when she was safely in the privacy of her own boudoir did she realise the full meaning of the situation.

She sank into a deep chair, overcome for a moment by the enormity of it. Her husband had gone to Monte Carlo. Why? He was going to find out about her. She knew it—she was certain of it. She recalled his tone as he had uttered those words. "Something I want to find out . . . as much as I can, in fact. . . . You have been there often. Is it not so?" There had been just a touch of embarrassment as he had first mentioned the name of his destination. He was too honest to be able to hide anything really successfully from her.

"Now I should have said that I was going elsewhere," she told herself, with a sad smile. "But oh! what a beast I am!" she exclaimed involuntarily, hating herself as she saw herself in her true colours, her character hopelessly laid bare by the searching rays of love. "Oh, let him go to Monte Carlo! Let him find out all about me and my gambling—I, who said I hated gambling so! I don't care! What does it all matter, now?" she cried recklessly, rising and walking up and down, up and down her rooms in an agony of mind. "What does anything matter when the one person I love hates and despises me? For he *does* despise me! Oh, I wish I were dead!"

The great tears slowly coursed down her cheeks, tears of hopeless rage borne against fate, of love, and, above all, of self-pity.

It was, after all, fitting that she should suffer. Even in her bitter and unrestrained grief she did not for one moment think of the awful consequences of her ill deeds. She was blind to the sorrow and tribulation in which she, from sheer spite and malice and revengefulness, had brought Sir George Allingham and his beautiful young wife. Sir George Allingham was in prison. His wife had left him! Of these things she did not think for one moment. Much must be allowed to one suffering the unhappiness of an unrequited love, and only later on was the terrible act of which she had been guilty to be brought home to

her. Incredible as it seems, she had utterly forgotten Sir George lying there in gaol, waiting his trial, helpless, self-accused of a crime of which only she could prove him innocent. What were his thoughts night and day as he lay there, with little to occupy his mind save that one awful idea, the conviction of his wife's guilt? The terrible days and nights passed in hopeless, unavailable conjecture. The ceaseless wondering what had made his wife, of all people, a common thief. The certainty that something must have been too strong for her—that she had been forced to commit the crime by some one. But by whom? His days and nights passed as in some horrible dream. And Theodora, who in Florence had been striving to forget, was now flying from the city in which she had hoped to find a haven of rest for her tired soul. And Marcel, robbed of the plans of his airship, and mad with rage and fear and disappointment! All this was the work of the wretched, weeping woman crouching there in her lovely room.

A woman was she among the most beautiful and envied in all Paris. Ah, could they have seen her now—those people who envied her wealth and looks! The humblest little dressmaker would not have exchanged her position, even for a moment, with this sobbing, heart-broken creature, heedless of all in her overwhelming grief and despair.

The Count de Rigos was glad to leave Paris. He had longed to get away from it ever since the moment when he had experienced those terrible suspicions of his wife's deceit and treachery.

But he had another object in his mind besides the relief which he knew the warmth and sun of the south and the freedom from the unbearable situation in his home would give him. He intended to find out what those words he had overheard from the gossiping servants meant. He earnestly hoped that there was no truth in them, for although he knew that in many ways she had lied to him and taken advantage of his

trusting nature, he shrank from the knowledge of any new and disagreeable discovery about her. And yet he felt that he must learn all the truth.

This task was not a very difficult one.

There are many ways at Monte Carlo by which you may discover all about your neighbour and his past, and money opens most of the doors. He soon learnt all about the beautiful Mrs. Packinthorp.

"An English lady," he was told. "Oh yes, an elegant woman, and noticeably beautiful. Rumour had said strange things about her. But, then, it did about everybody. Her reputation was doubtful, but there was nothing much," said his informant, "only she certainly was a hopeless gambler. They said she always found money somewhere and somehow to play. These gamblers stick at nothing, and blackmail is often profitable if you are clever," he added meaningly.

The Count de Rigos could have struck the man as he stood there, smiling sarcastically and blasting his wife's reputation with a few careless words. But he realised that it was no time for anger, and that above all things, a scandal must be avoided. This kept his passionate anger in check, as outwardly calm, he listened to the tale of his wife's doings, punctuated with knowing looks and malicious grins.

"Oh yes, she was well known," said one of the attendants, whom his informant had summoned to verify the truth of his story. "But we get lots of them. They are penniless, and we have to pay their journey home, and they don't come back until they've managed to get some more cash somehow or other."

The Count de Rigos was astounded.

"Do you mean to tell me that the authorities once paid Mrs. Packinthorp's journey home," he asked, hardly believing his own ears.

That this woman, who to him had posed as all that was sweet and good, and a pronounced hater of gambling in particular, when he met her in London,

had only a month or so before been sent home from Monte Carlo after losing all she had won at the tables seemed impossible.

"Yes, sir, I remember it all quite well. They paid her hotel bill, too. Oh, she was a queer sort, and beautiful! Well, there! But perhaps you knew the lady, sir?"

The Count de Rigos shook his head. He was too furious to speak, and luckily, for had he done so his feelings might have escaped him, and the reply would certainly have astonished his listeners. His mind was a seething whirlpool of angry thoughts.

In a moment his quick southern temperament had turned his disappointment and disillusion to absolute hate of this woman, who had mocked and deceived him so cleverly and effectively.

As he walked away from the two men he reviewed mentally the weeks before and after his marriage. The many little speeches which had rested enshrined in his heart as gems of goodness and purity now stood out, one by one, as he looked back on them, in all their false and meretricious glitter. How could he ever have thought them real? That was what puzzled him now. That his great love had galvanised their miserable flashy rays into pure magnetic beams did not occur to him, and now he only saw himself a fool—as she must have seen him always.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

On through the night rushed that northern train, bearing East and his mother and Theodora so hastily away from Florence.

About four o'clock in the morning they came over wide, melancholy, flat marshlands into the magnificent old city of Verona, with its superb walls and arches and vast ruined amphitheatre lying all dark and silent in the waning moonlight.

"The city of Romeo and Juliet," said Theodora. But East dispelled her sentimental imaginings by telling her of those great horse fairs held now on the very site of the lovely and hapless Juliet's tomb.

"I shall get out here and telegraph to the Tyrolerhof for rooms," he said.

He stepped out of the train and made his way along the station to the telegraph office, where he hastily sent off a wire to the Hôtel Tyrol, Innsbruck, asking for a suite of rooms to be reserved for three people and a maid, and a private sitting-room, where all meals could be served separately.

"That will save her the necessity of going down to eat in the public dining halls," he said to himself.

Nothing seemed to him too much to do for this girl, who had come so strangely and unexpectedly into his life, and it gave him an absolute feeling of joy to be wiring injunctions for fires in all the rooms and a carriage with foot-warmers to meet them at the station, although the hotel was scarcely two minutes' drive therefrom, as he well knew.

So engrossed was he with the details of his long,

extravagant telegram that he saw nothing of the man in a big sombrero hat and long black cape, worn in the manner of the Italian—that is to say, with the right side slung away over the left shoulder gracefully and—to English eyes—a little melodramatically.

Quite blind was he to the fact that this man approached the telegraph office the moment he came out and went straight to the official behind the window.

"I have made a mistake," said the black-bearded man, "in the telegram I have just sent. I put the wrong number. There it lies—there on the desk. One moment, permit me."

The official handed it to him.

"Ah! no, no," he cried angrily. "Not this! This is some one else's. This is German. I do not understand it. That is mine there beside you."

With profuse and flowery apologies the official handed him his own telegram.

"Scuse, signore," he said apologetically. "I thought it was this one you indicated."

"No, no," said Armand Roche, testily. "You should be more careful another time. There"—he glanced hastily over his own telegram, keeping up the feint very well indeed of wishing to see it again. Then he handed it back with a bow. "I see it is all right," he said.

The words in his own telegram directed to the editor of *Le Jour*, Paris, were the following rather curious ones:—

"Have brought old man following Lady Allingham. She fears, suspects, is flying from me. I follow to Innsbruck. Wire any instructions to me Poste Restante there.

"ARMAND ROCHE."

Such was his own wire.

The one he had hastily scanned had read—

"Reserve rooms for three and maid, with private

sitting-room, first floor. Have fires lighted everywhere and rooms well warmed. Order flowers. Send carriage to station, with rugs and foot warmers, to meet the evening train.

"WILLIAM EAST."

"Good," muttered Armand Roche, to himself. "The plot thickens. The story gets exciting. It runs something like this, I fancy. Our beautiful Lady Allingham has a very, *very* guilty conscience, and is desperately anxious that her identity and whereabouts remain concealed more than ever."

He rubbed his hands together. Going to the buffet he tossed off a long drink of vermouth, rum, and seltzer, and ate an enormous sandwich stuffed with cold sausage.

"She had a reason," he muttered to himself, as the rum and vermouth mounted to his brain. "*Fear!* that's it. The lovely and adorable Lady Allingham has fallen a victim to an overmastering fear *of being found out.* Then what has she done? The answer is obvious. It was she who stole those plans, and I suspected it from the first moment I heard of Sir George Allingham's arrest. I may be only a journalist," he thought excitedly, "but I know an honest man when I see one, and if ever there was a man who did not steal, and could not lie—except to save his wife—that man is Sir George Allingham, or my name is not Armand Roche!"

The night was cold, though the dark blue skies were strewn luxuriously with glittering stars, and the moonlight fell on the river flowing through the ancient city, and touched the magnificent yellow walls and citadels and ruins with the inimitable softness and tenderness of moonlight upon beautiful architecture. It was almost as if the moon knew and reverenced and gave deep worship to the loveliness and dignity of the architectural lines and curves.

"We have half an hour's wait here," Theodora said

to East. "Don't you think I might as well alight, and walk up and down the station, while Mrs. Ellerton is sleeping so profoundly under her rugs!"

East fell in with her every wish. It made him only too happy to know that there was anything she cared about, so that he might try to let her have it.

"I will walk with you," he said. "We'll pace up and down beside the train."

As is always the case in Italian trains, there was a long, impossible jump to make from the carriage to the ground, and he held out his arms to Theodora when he saw her recoil.

"Let me lift you down," he said simply; and, taking her in his arms, he raised her as easily as though she had been a child, and then put her safely on the ground.

In that moment, held in those strong arms, a strange host of recollections had come rushing over Theodora.

For one thing, it seemed so extraordinary that a mere man could hold her—a bundle of ideals, dreams, physical structure, and chiffons — in two mortal arms; and she remembered that the very same amaze had flashed upon her when George had, for the first time, lifted her laughingly from the ground to show her how strong he was. But she laughed. She said softly to East, "I hope I wasn't frightfully heavy," and laughed again at his vehement denial.

"Don't protest too much," she said lightly.

"I couldn't," said East.

"That sounds dubious," said Theodora. "It might mean —well, it might mean anything."

"I confess it means something," replied East.

They were pacing up and down the platform now. A strange light-heartedness had taken possession of each of them, which was partly the effect of the long rush through a strange country in such a pure spirit of adventure, and partly the effect of each other's

personality. But poor, poor East! How far he was from guessing the truth!

When he saw the curving smiles about those scarlet lips, and the flashing brightness of the violet eyes, he was happy because he saw and knew that she was happy when with him. Never for one moment did he dream that his presence filled her continually with a half bitter, half sweet, and wholly mocking emotion, because it reminded her of her husband. Never for a moment could he guess that she looked up into his grey eyes and recollected the steady glance of one who was far away. Never for a moment did he suspect when he held her in his arms as he lifted her out of the train, and her face lay for one, brief, breathless moment against his heart, that she was not there in truth. She was far, far away. For a magic moment she was again in George's arms, and it was George's rough grey coat that was under her cheek, and it was George's strength that surrounded her in that strange, dreamlike moment on the starlit Verona platform, when East was lifting her out of the train.

East gave no sign of his feelings. This was neither time nor place for that.

"Later on," he said to himself, "later on, who knows? But now I'm just her knight and her pal, as I said I would be—that's all, and she is my sister—for the nonce."

Up and down they walked. The long, dimly-lighted train lay stretched beside them, and they could see into the carriages as they strolled up and down.

They saw Mrs. Ellerton comfortably ensconced among cushions and rugs, with the light cunningly shaded away from her face, lost in deep slumber. They saw a strange mixture of people in the various carriages. Black-haired, hatless *contadini*, or peasants, going from Verona into the country; smart, spick-and-span Austrian officers on their way over the

frontier; American and English tourists in very small numbers, going north for the toboganning and winter sports. But they did not see the old white-haired man with pale blue eyes who was lying sleepless on the yellow wood of a third-class carriage close to the engine.

For that was where Armand Roche and old Ivan had secreted themselves on their midnight journey.

"Oh, I love Italy!" cried Theodora, passionately, standing still suddenly in their perambulations, and casting one wide fleeting glance over the silent, melancholy plains out of which the great age-old city of Verona rose with such an inimitable grace and dignity.

"I love it, too," echoed East.

But he was blind to those inky-black cypresses, pointing their mysterious fingers towards the moon. He was insensate to the marvellous charm of the antique city, with its almost Eastern gorgeousness of architecture. He was unconscious that a network of glittering silver stars was turning the dark blue sky into fairyland. He only knew that Margaret Wood was walking up and down the platform beside him.

They took their seats in the train again at last. And further along a man with a black beard jumped in beside his white-haired companion, and rubbed his hands softly and satisfiedly, thinking to himself that he was indeed a made man, and that *Le Jour* was far too clever to ignore the fact.

The capo del stazione (stationmaster) in his tall scarlet hat ran up and down the platform excitedly. A porter lifted a vast horn to his lips and blew on it the weird unearthly blast that heralds the departure of Italian trains, and they were off! Trent, Ala, were passed, and the Customs officers were duly satisfied, and they found themselves well over the borders of Italy and Austria as the sun rose over the new day. Everything had changed colour instantly, with almost incredible suddenness. The very train

itself was different. It was several degrees cleaner and neater. The guards on it were spruce little Germans, with fair moustaches and guttural voices. An air of solemnity and gravity and decorum had taken the place of the delightful, lazy, languid happiness and *allegria* of the Italian part of the journey. Vast snow-covered mountains and valleys, white with rose lights upon them, as the sun rose high, usurped the tender blues and purples of the dreaming Italian landscapes; and onwards they rushed, further and further away from Florence, and, as Theodora fondly believed, from the clever, pertinent journalist, Armand Roche, whose eyes went through her so remorselessly.

It was evening as they flew down over the Brenner, where the fir trees were glistening under their pure white snow covers, and the ground lay pale and soft in the dark. And night had well fallen when they swept down into the vast white valley of the River Inn.

East's telegram had had its due effect, and a luxurious carriage was there awaiting them. Tired, but cheerful, they drove through the sparkling streets of Innsbruck, with its great overhanging mountains and its crowds of merry German and Austrian university students pacing up and down beside the brightly-lighted shops.

In a few moments they had reached their destination—the tall white building of the Hôtel Tyrol, standing in the centre of the town—and were being welcomed by the courteous proprietor, who assured them that he had done his best to meet all their wishes, and hoped they would be comfortable during their stay. Mrs. Ellerton and her maid had already entered the lift. Theodora was just about to follow, when an interruption occurred.

A man stepped forward quickly, with a low bow and a way of holding his hat on one side in his right hand which could only be acquired in Paris.

"Pardon, madame," he said in a low voice. "I crave just one word with you."

The skies seemed to rock above Theodora, and the varnished floors to go up and down under her feet.

There before her stood Armand Roche—the man she had taken so long a journey to get away from!

"What do you want?"

East was talking to the proprietor; for the moment he had noticed nothing.

"I want a private conversation with you," said Armand Roche, immediately.

"It is impossible."

"It is wise."

"I repeat, it is impossible," said Theodora.

She had forgotten that she was Miss Margaret Wood—Mrs. Ellerton's companion. Again she was Lady Allingham—the idol of Paris society. Drawing herself up to her full height, she flashed upon him a look of indescribable haughtiness and scorn, which gave her beauty so emphatic a note that the Parisian's heart fairly bounded within him as he looked at her.

"*Mon Dieu,* but she is a beauty!" he muttered.

But he was Armand Roche, of *Le Jour,* and must not be overcome by a woman's looks. His work was cut out. Let him see to it that he did it.

"Lady Allingham," he said in a low voice, "you are making a great mistake to treat me like this. Ever since Sir George Allingham has lain in prison there in Paris——"

"*What?*"

She interrupted him with a loud cry that startled every one in the vestibule and brought East in terror to her side.

"What is it you are saying?" she cried, a deathly whiteness blanching her cheeks and lips with horror. She trembled. But she mastered that immediately.

"But it is impossible—impossible," said Armand, aghast at the sudden, unmistakable evidences of

ignorance and amazement that had overwhelmed her at his words about Sir George being in prison. "Surely you were acquainted with the facts before this?"

"Oh, what are you saying to me, monsieur?" she cried, rushing towards him and clasping her two white hands wildly around his arm, utterly oblivious of all those standing around her. "*Sir George Allingham in prison?*"

"He was arrested on Christmas Day for the theft of the plans of M. Fleur's airship, which were supposed to have been concealed in your ladyship's dressing-bag. He declared his guilt when the police went to the house to search" — he refrained from saying "for *you*." "Some fragments of Monsieur Fleur's letters from a lady were found. Monsieur Fleur alleged them to have been stolen also from his laboratory. But there was no sign of your dressing-bag or of the plans. And you were gone!"

"*My dressing-bag!*"

Pitifully, half-madly indeed, her violet eyes were imploring his to make this fearful mystery clear to her.

"Your dressing-bag," he continued gently, moved uncontrollably by the sight of her emotion. "It had disappeared."

"*Disappeared!*"

She looked round wildly, and seeing East beside her, held her hand out to him as if to bring him close to her for support. With one stride he was at her side. His steady eyes looked down at hers. "Courage," he whispered. "I'm here; I will stand by you."

"I never opened it. It was stolen from me in the train," she whispered hoarsely. Then her voice fell, and she swayed and dropped into East's ready arms.

"I must go at once to George," she murmured. "Oh, take me to Paris, William," she said, swooning away in a dead faint against his breast.

CHAPTER XXXIX

CROUCHING by her fire in deepest dejection was a woman who was scarcely to be recognised as the Countess de Rigos. What had happened to her? Whither had fled all her old-time buoyancy and elegance, her indomitable smartness and *chic*, and that courage of hers never to submit or yield that had always cried out loudly in a difficult situation—to quote the words of the fallen angel—"to be weak is miserable, doing or suffering"? Where now was all her courage? And her inexhaustible spirit, her unconquerable resolve to succeed and surmount all obstacles, into what far-off region had they taken wing — these former marked characteristics of the beautiful Countess de Rigos?

It was mid-afternoon, and a heavy fog had descended upon Paris, swathing the vast city in suffocating yellow folds. Breathless and stagnant was the air. That great, terrible calm, weighted and significant, that often precedes the coming of some memorable and deadly storm or earthquake, brooded over the gay metropolis, hushing its laughter, dulling the gaiety of its lights, deadening the brightness even of its *cafés*. It was as though a great wave had flowed over Paris and wiped out for a moment laughter, light, and song, and that apparent inextinguishable gaiety that marks this city especially for its own, and makes it different from any other, except perhaps lovely, careless, *allegro* Venice, and, in a lesser degree, little, laughing Brussels.

"Oh, Heaven! How much longer can I endure

this!" She threw herself back in an attitude of despairing abandon on the great white settee covered with snowy bearskins and enormous cushions of pale purple silk.

It was three days and three nights since Ignace had left her.

For three whole days and three whole nights she had neither slept nor eaten, and to-day, in consequence she was scarcely to be recognised as the lovely woman who had won the heart of the Mexican aristocrat. Wasted to a shadow was she, haggard and grey.

It was as though a fever was consuming her. Her pulse never beat at a normal rate now. Her blood ran hot. An unnatural temperature was hers. The sage who said that love is a fever from which one either recovers or dies, might well have had in view the fate of the Countess de Rigos. It seemed as though she were destined to die of the fever. Try as she would to drown her thoughts, they inevitably returned to the one subject, Ignace. His face swam before her. How was it she had never realised before the beauty of those pale, chiselled features, the carven, beautiful mouth, the deep, fathomless eyes, with all their Spanish lustre, depth, and softness, the fine contour of the face, the perfectly moulded forehead, upon which the black, crisp hair grew in so fascinatingly boyish a manner, the little curl running through it, such as every woman with a heart is instantly susceptible to! And he, this handsome, charming young aristocrat, was her own husband, and only a few short days ago had worshipped her madly. And now? Now it seemed as if the blood in his veins had frozen, his pulse had stopped beating almost. His eyes had no glance for her but a stony, remorseless stare, which seemed to expose all the petty vanities, follies, and falseness of her heart. Not a word of love fell from his lips. Nothing but cold, set phrases issued from the mouth that so short a time

ago had woven sweet words of tenderness and adoration for her and her alone. The change was terrible. She could scarcely realise it. And yet there was the fact staring her in the face. He had left her.

"How could you, how could you!" she moaned.

She pressed her face down into the violet pillows, and the tears burnt their fiery way into the soft silk, staining it in great discoloured patches.

"I shall kill myself if he does not return," she moaned.

For a long, long time she lay there, prone in her misery, and then her maid entered with some tea, and she sat up, murmuring excuses about her violent headache.

Carelessly her white fingers squeezed a lemon into the fragrant Russian beverage, and she drank it off feverishly. "That is good," she murmured, pouring herself out another cup and reaching for her cigarettes. Presently the tea began to clear her brain a little, while the cigarettes soothed her. Her thoughts grew less tortured and agonised. She began to think clearly. And suddenly hope came flashing back, renewed magically by this slight physical renewal of her bodily strength caused by the tea and her cigarettes.

There was a knock at the door, and the maid who had lately brought the tea came in and announced a visitor who wanted urgently to see her. She was a young English lady, Miss Margaret Wood.

"She seems in trouble, and begs that you will talk to her, if only for one moment," said the maid.

"Have I not told you I can see no one?" replied the Countess de Rigos, sharply. "I have already given you the strictest injunctions that no one was to be admitted to my presence. In fact, I was not at home if anyone called."

"I know, my lady!"

She was not going to explain that a ten-pound note had been pressed into her hand by the gentle-

man who accompanied Miss Margaret Wood, and was waiting in the firelit hall below.

"If the archangel Gabriel called I should not receive him," cried the Countess, with a return of her old manner, and an attempt at a laugh.

But, alas! It died away on her lips, that laugh. It was stifled to death at the sight of the tall, white, hollow-eyed woman who came gliding in through the open door.

"Lady Allingham!"

"Yes, it is I," replied the other. "Since you do not know me as Miss Margaret Wood, I have come myself in my own name." She turned to the maid. "Leave us," she said, in her old peremptory manner; "I wish to speak to the Countess de Rigos alone."

The maid went out, and the door closed behind her, and these two women, Lady Allingham and the Countess de Rigos, were left face to face, alone.

For a moment or two they stared at each other in silence, paralysed by the appalling change each saw in the other's face. All the lovely, haunting youthfulness of Theodora's eyes and lips and radiant hair seemed to have passed away from her. She was white as death. Her cheeks had fallen in. Her eyes were glittering with fever, her lips were white and dry. It was evident at one glance she was in an unnatural condition of excitement and illness.

And the Countess de Rigos was equally changed. She had gone from a young woman to an old woman in a few days.

"Why have you come? What do you want?" she gasped.

"I have come to get the truth," said Theodora.

"What truth?"

She attempted to brazen it out, as she had brazened everything else out in her false and apparently successful career. She laughed.

We do not know how we discover things about each other. Always there is mysterious thought at

work about us, and sometimes we read people's most carefully guarded secrets—which they suppose they so cleverly and successfully conceal—as clearly and distinctly as though they had been put in large black handwriting or printing upon their foreheads. Absolutely sure are we that we are right. Then why are we so sure? Simply because we realise, unconsciously it may be, that we are in the grip of some force far greater than reason—far more subtle and complicated and mysterious than anything human intelligence can account for. Suddenly, and without, as it were, the slightest relevancy, Theodora's brain had built up before her a picture of her boudoir, and that strange, mysterious girl with the box, who had brought back her letters to Marcel on Christmas Eve. The girl had come as if she were a dressmaker's assistant, bearing a large cardboard box, ostensibly containing blouses; then she had suddenly opened the box and presented Theodora with a packet of letters, which she said she had been asked to deliver by Monsieur Fleur, and Theodora had torn up the letters and thrown them into the fire, all in a breath, and when she turned to the girl she had gone. The whole affair had been very strange. And now, without knowing how, Theodora seemed to be suddenly carried forward and placed upon a certain track which she had to follow.

"Won't you sit down?" said the Countess.

"I will not sit down in your house."

"As you will, but I—I'm tired; I have no fancy for standing. Pardon me if I am remiss;" and she threw herself back with an affectation of languid carelessness in the snowy nest.

"Let us come to the point at once," said Theodora. "My husband, Sir George Allingham, is in prison, as you know, accused of stealing the plans of Monsieur Fleur's airships, which anonymous letters declared would be found in my dressing-bag. Now, what I want to know is this. How did those plans get into

my dressing-bag, if they were there? Who put them there? What enemy—sufficiently malevolent and wicked—had access to my rooms on Christmas Eve?"

"I really don't know what you're talking about," said the Countess de Rigos, airily.

"Ah yes, you do," said Theodora, standing over her, and suddenly gripping her by the wrists. "Woman, listen to me. Your hour has come. It is useless to deny longer. You're face to face now with a desperate wife. You're looking into the eyes of one who fears nothing, for she is armed with a weapon of which you—poor, miserable, worm-like creature that you are—are wholly ignorant—the unconquerable weapon of love!"

The Countess de Rigos lifted her head, and broke into uncontrollable hysterical tears and laughter.

"After that," she said, "I think I shall tell you the truth. Then you shall learn that some one besides yourself, Lady Allingham, knows the meaning of what love is!"

Never before had she revealed herself in all her true criminality of character as at that moment. Reckless—utterly reckless—was she. She was prepared to give herself away haphazard. And this, so say the great psychologists and criminologists, is the distinctive and characteristic feature of the true criminal. At a given moment he or she is bound to lose his or her perspective. He becomes blind and indifferent to results. He is overwhelmed with an enormous incapacity to realise consequences.

The Countess de Rigos was lost in those quicksands of crime. She was blind to consequences. A cruel, inexorable power was driving her on to confess lavishly anything and everything, no matter how much it might be to her detriment.

"What is it you want to know?" she queried recklessly.

"Oh! that you can ask me that!" cried Theodora,

distractedly. "I want to know"—she put a tremendous restraint upon herself, and summoned all her reason to her command—"I want to know if you know aught of how the plans got into my dressing-bag?"

"I! Why of course I do, my dear. I put them there," replied the Countess.

Suddenly she was overcome with an immense sense of elation and self-glory at the way in which her plans had succeeded.

"You little fool!" she laughed low and fiercely. "Don't you know who it was that took you in so foolishly on Christmas Eve? Haven't you guessed who the little dressmaker was, with the box? Why, you fool! you fool!" she burst out in delirious self-elation, "it was I, I myself, yes, I, the Countess de Rigos, who took you in so splendidly and completely. I was the one who brought you back those letters to Marcel Fleur—and very silly letters they were, too, my dear!"

She broke into wild laughter, as the scene repeated itself before her eyes in vivid cinematograph fashion. "My dear woman—dear idiot, I may say! While you were throwing the letters into the fire, I was putting the plans into your dressing-bag. That's the truth." Her voice rose. "I knew what I was about, and I was determined to blast you and your immaculate and ridiculous husband. Did you suppose for one moment that I was going to let pigmies like you and Sir George Allingham treat me like dirt, and cut away all my social position, as you tried to do at the *fête* of the Duchess that afternoon, when you cut me dead before my husband and other members of Parisian society? Did you take me for a stick, dried and lifeless, that you thought I would not strike back when you attacked me in that horrid, superior way of yours? Didn't you know that I was a dangerous case, a woman who would stick at nothing to get my revenge? If you didn't, my dear, you are a

greater fool than I thought! And that's all I've got to say about the matter."

She threw herself back on the white bearskin, and let her black head sink into the soft nest of the violet cushion, while a low, unpleasant laugh burst from her lips at the sight of Lady Allingham's white staring face.

"You are a fool—an utter fool!" she said. "I really think it's time you knew the truth about yourself."

Not a word issued from the lips of her listener.

It seemed as if Theodora had been struck dumb in the face of the information she had just received. But at last, collecting herself by an immense effort, she rose to her feet and stood looking down upon the beautiful, black-haired Countess de Rigos, with her background of pale mauve and deepest Parma violet cushions.

"I never dreamed that a woman like you could draw breath!" she said. "And yet, if you have confessed the naked truth, you have done a wonderful thing!"

At her words the Countess seemed to come from some absorbing trance, and returned to her old cold, imperturbable self.

The mood for self-abasement had completely passed, as it always does with your true criminal. Bravado had returned. Her nerves had tightened. A sudden overwhelming vision of her folly in confessing was flashing across her brain.

"What are you saying?" she cried wildly. "I—I confessed! You lie! What have I got to confess to you?"

"*The truth, the truth!*" said another voice.

CHAPTER XL

EAST had entered noiselessly, drawn by some irresistible intuition of coming danger to Lady Allingham, and his words and action startled the Countess de Rigos into terrified silence. So there had been a witness to her appallingly reckless speeches! The incredible things she had been saying about herself had been overheard. The very sight of this unknown man, so vibrant with quiet strength and honesty, brought her fully to her senses.

"I must have been mad!" she muttered, pressing her white, jewelled hands in bewilderment to her brow.

"No! No! You were never saner!" cried Theodora, in a voice of elation.

She swept across the room in her long travelling-cloak. All the weakness that she had been battling against so courageously in the long journey from the Austrian Tyrol to Paris was forgotten; a fever burnt in her veins and supported her with an unnatural strength. She seized the white wrists of the Countess de Rigos and stood towering over the other woman with blazing eyes.

"Woman, you were never saner," she declared in exultant tones. "You told the truth for once. And, thank Heaven, your words were heard by some one other than myself. Now, speak! Go on with your story." She shook the white wrists. "Tell me all you know," she commanded fiercely. "And quickly, too! Time is short. An honest gentleman has lain in prison long enough. He shall remain there no longer."

Down at the farther end of the room the curtains of rose velvet hanging over a door stirred slightly and a dark face looked forth for a moment. Then it quietly drew back into concealment. Theodora and East, whose backs were turned, saw nothing. But the Countess de Rigos's faculties were now all on edge, and her eyes had fallen upon that moving curtain ; she saw in a flash the dark face full of hate looking across the room at her, though it was unaware that she observed its presence.

"Ignace!"

But she stifled the word on her lips.

All of a sudden came floating over her a great resolution.

She was penned in between three people who all despised her.

But what odds? What did their presence matter? What did it signify to her that they were going to do their best to wrest from her a full confession of her evil deeds? What was all that compared to the thing she was going to do herself?

With a miraculous effort of will she brought an expression of heartrending grief over her countenance and began softly to weep, the great, glittering tears falling without being wiped away, for her hands were still locked in Theodora's fevered clutch.

"My heart is broken when I think of all the mischief I have done," she sobbed. "But I will confess, I will confess!"

At the back of her brain she was thinking of Ignace, and wondering what had occasioned his unexpected return. Why had he come back? Not for love of her. That one fleeting glimpse of his face had shown her that it was colder and more bitter in its expression than before, if that were possible. No, it was not for her that he had returned, and she conjectured that it must be some document of importance —his will, perhaps—that he had forgotten in his haste, and her conjecture was right. He had come

back for papers which he had need of, and feared might fall into the clutches of his unscrupulous wife.

Hidden behind the curtain, his handsome lips were touched with a mocking smile as he saw the great tears. Hate raged within him. Yet, even now, something softer stirred dimly in his heart at the sight of her distress—real or assumed.

Her words came stealing across the room to him, uttered in low, vibrant tones that grew gradually louder and stronger as her emotion appeared to master her.

"Oh! what have I done to bring such punishment upon myself?"

She was crying bitterly, standing there in misery and self-abasement.

"I suffer now because I see myself in a true light. Yes, I will tear the mask from my face! No longer shall you believe me to be what every one thinks me. I can no longer allow you to look upon me as such. I must clear the innocent of the dreadful charge made against him." Her voice rose. "Oh! the terror of it! That he should suffer, that innocent gentleman, Sir George Allingham. He did not steal the plans. Who believes that he did? No one who knows him. And the world says he branded himself with ignominy to save his wife. But she—she did not steal them either—yet they were stolen, and why? By whom?" She threw her head back and burst into bitter hysterical sobs. "Oh! let me confess! Let me confess the whole truth!" she said. "I—I am to blame!" Her words choked her. "I am the guilty one!"

De Rigos heard these words with mixed sensations; every emotion seemed to be pressing down upon him—horror—anguish—contempt—admiration—pity—hatred—all coursed through his veins as the speech of the woman came floating towards him.

"Ah! let the innocent go free, and punish me," she cried. "It was I who disguised myself as a

dressmaker, brought the plans to your bedroom and placed them in your dressing-bag while your back was turned. I was the little dressmaker's assistant, as I told you just now. Incredible as it seems, I obtained those letters of yours from Marcel Fleur without his knowledge."

Then suddenly it struck her that she might improve upon that statement, and she added quickly—

"I mean without his knowledge of what I was going to do with them, for he himself presented them to me."

"Is it possible?" burst from Theodora's lips.

"All things are possible to men," cried the Countess, "except to one man, my husband," she added.

She bowed her head on her breast and gave way to violent and very effective sobs.

"Oh! how I am suffering!" she moaned. "But through it all I feel the justice of it. I deserve to suffer. Don't think for one moment that I am not keenly alive to that, and yet, oh! dear Lady Allingham, there is surely some allowance to be made for me."

"What do you mean? What allowance can possibly be made for you?" said East, sternly.

"I've done mischief enough," said the Countess, meekly; "I will not do any further harm to the man who has already suffered his share."

"Are you speaking of Sir George Allingham?" asked Theodora, fiercely.

"Yes!"

"Then you shall explain yourself."

Her burning little hands were like bands of fire round the other woman's crushed wrists.

"Oh, dear Lady Allingham, pity me, pity yourself, pity Sir George!" wept the Countess de Rigos.

The Count quivered. "What is coming now?" he asked himself, trembling with amazement at the

extraordinary behaviour of his wife. "What is she going to say next?" He watched her. Whither had fled her beauty? Where was her old-time charm? She was haggard and ghastly, with her hair hanging loose and undressed over her shoulders, and her grey velvet gown emphasising all the defects and ravages that grief and suspense had wrought in her usually so carefully cared-for person. She was actually ugly.

Yet he was staring at her hungrily, with a look in his eyes that had never been there before, even in the hour of his most absolute worship, when all that art and wealth could summon to her assistance had been used by her to aid her beauty and charm. "*In this moment she is real*," he was telling himself.

He held his breath, unconscious himself of the tremendous strain under which he was labouring, as he waited for further developments in this extraordinary drama which was being played so cleverly all for his benefit, had he only known it.

"Do you mean that my husband was in love with you?" cried Theodora. "Is that what you are endeavouring to insinuate?"

"Not to insinuate," said the Countess, sadly, "but to suppress! Why should I grieve you—you poor, poor child, who have suffered so much already?"

"He forgot me utterly the moment he met you," she continued. "Your exquisite young beauty wiped out, like a sponge over a slate, every trace of his affection for me. In one moment, as it were, I was forgotten. He had asked me to marry him, and I had consented. Then you came into his life, and what was more natural than that he should fall madly in love with your wonderful beauty and youth? Ah, your youth!" she cried. "He worshipped that—it was that he worshipped so, and that you had never had eyes for any one else. My youth was gone. I was the widow of an old friend of his. I was not young —I was not beautiful. What more natural than that I should be superseded?"

Theodora had relaxed her burning grasp on those white wrists. The Countess's hands were now free to dab a little lace handkerchief to her eyes.

She wept bitterly for several moments. Then she controlled herself, and continued in a low, shaking voice—

"Sir George Allingham threw me over—he threw me aside, and I was but a woman. I resented it. I had a heart. How can I help it that I am made like that—a woman who feels deeply and intensely? I suffered terribly. I was overwhelmed by the feeling of revenge. I knew I had been treated unfairly, and by degrees it grew into an obsession with me, it overwhelmed other things. I had to be revenged. Some power stronger than myself carried me onwards, whispered to me that I must show that fair, highly respected Englishman what it was to suffer. And so I stole the plans and placed them in your dressing-bag, knowing that suffering to you would be the most terrible suffering that could fall upon him." She threw out her white hands in a wild, dramatic gesture. "There is the truth!" she cried. "Now you know me at my worst —a woman who revenged herself for love. But it was not real love," she added softly, and her eyelids came down for the moment, while the eyelashes formed a dark fringe against the pallor of her cheeks. "It was not real, I had learnt that, for it was permitted me to know the difference. I was shown by fate the true and glorious nature of a real love. I married the Count de Rigos, as you know, and in him I found all that I had hitherto missed in life. And I learnt to love him, to adore him."

The note in her voice now was utterly genuine in its fierce tenderness.

"Never was there any one like him, my Ignace, my husband," she cried; "and though he has left me, spurning me for my femininity and weakness, I shall love him to my dying day, and after—'out beyond into the world to come,'" she quoted softly,

with her eyes still closed and that rapt look lingering upon her face.

East's calm, quiet voice broke through the hysterical, excited atmosphere of the rooms, like a cold wind after a burning *scirocco*.

"I have taken your statement in writing," he said, pointing to the page of shorthand he had been rapidly transcribing. "I think when needed you will be called upon to give your evidence, and I take it that you will be ready to do your best to liberate Sir George Allingham from his present absurd and disgraceful position."

"Anything I can do," she cried, "command me. Tell me—just tell me what I shall do. All I want is to make reparation—only that!"

"Then, Lady Allingham, I think that we had better go," said East, turning to Theodora. "There is much to do."

When they had gone, the Countess de Rigos threw herself at full length on the wide divan among the innumerable cushions.

"Oh, my heart is broken completely," she sobbed, "and yet I have only done my duty!" She raised her voice so that Ignace could not help but hear. "I have told the truth. I have painted myself in my blackest colours. I have covered myself with everlasting shame and ignominy. I deserve no pity. Grief and loneliness are all that I can conscientiously demand from life, and they—are they to be my portion? I see that clearly. My husband—my beloved—has left me, He thinks me weak, perhaps. He little knows that. after all, I am no coward. Surely he would have realised that in this heart of mine there is a wealth of goodness and courage, waiting only to be called upon. Surely he would have loved me a little as he did in those dear hours gone by. Surely he would have forgiven me."

"He must have forgiven you," echoed a voice, speaking aloud from somewhere among the silent

shadows cast by the swiftly oncoming night in the rooms of the Countess de Rigos. Her husband stood before her.

"He does forgive you," he was saying.

There was the gleam of something bright and glittering. He stooped over her, and a report was heard. At the same instant the Countess fell.

"You shall confess no more, my angel. . . . Ignace, who loved you well and deeply, will save you from the inevitable fate he sees lurking in front of you! Sooner or later, beloved, you would have to answer before the tribunal of the world for these misdeeds of yours. You would be tried! You would be judged! Ah! beloved," he muttered, "the judges who have been selected by this world to arraign their fellow-creatures would not be kind to you, my dear one. They would call you hard, hard names. They would mete out to you the full measure of punishment, never taking into consideration for one moment your temperament, your dauntless courage, and those terrible circumstances of fate against which you have waged war, poor dear one, with such qualms of heart that you bravely conceal, with such agonies of mind, with such unequal never-to-be-forgotten effrontery!"

He stole away from her rooms then, and went straight down the stairs, out of the house, unnoticed by any one; and he was far away from Paris when midnight fell upon the glittering, night-loving city, and the death of the lovely Countess was already circulating sensationally far and wide through the medium of the indefatigable evening journals.

Suicide! Death by her own hand! Shot through the heart!

For the revolver lay there on the snowy bearskins, just where it had fallen from her ice-cold fingers; and the bullet-wound in her breast was just where it could have been most easily fired by her own hand, right into her heart, with all its falseness and duplicity, that was now for ever ended in the stillness and silence of Death.

CHAPTER XLI

THE day had dawned at last when the French Government would wait no longer. Rumours had been afloat and circulating for a long time. Sometimes they died away; then they broke out again more distinctly than ever, fed by the ingenious and unceasing tactics of *Le Jour*.

"*What has become of our National Airship?*"

"*Is Monsieur Marcel Fleur asleep or dreaming?*"

"*When are we to have our demonstration?*"

"*Paris astir. Where is our Marcel Fleur's world-talked-of invention? Why do we hear and see no more of it?*"

And so on.

They began softly, these murmurs; they increased in sound and volume; they grew bolder and more direct in their demands and insinuations, until at last the little insidious sparks had been fanned into vast flames, that kept on growing and growing in their fierceness and intensity.

Armand Roche, of *Le Jour*, was at work now in deadly earnest. He was carefully guarding Ivan, and keeping from him all the news of the day, and luckily—for *Le Jour*—that icy journey from Florence to Innsbruck had had a disastrous effect on the old man's frame, and he was now confined to his bed in an hotel at Munich—not altogether to Armand Roche's regret. Armand was in luck, he thought. His telegrams respecting Lady Allingham had been splendid. No other paper had managed to get hold of that news. And now she had flown to Paris. He

had let her go—that was his way of putting it—he had not followed. To guard Ivan was his work, for the great scheme of *Le Jour* was now about to be perpetrated.

Marcel Fleur was announced to give his great public demonstration. At last Paris was about to be satisfied. And at last *Le Jour* was about to make its triumphal coup.

The night before, Marcel Fleur sat huddled up and shivering in a great armchair in front of the dying fire in his laboratory in the Faubourg St. Germain.

On the long table was the model which had been brought him by the Englishman, Bostock, a few months previously. It was connected with the machinery of which it was the necessary complement. The electric current from the main had been turned on, and to a stranger coming into the room, it would have seemed that the continuous movement of wheels, which caused a musical hum to resound throughout the chamber, indicated a beautifully balanced mechanism. If this stranger had looked further, he would have seen the table bestrewed with paper, and plans—plans fixed with pins on drawing-boards, plans rolled out and kept in place by any kind of weights, books in most cases, at their four corners, plans half unrolled or wholly rolled up.

Marcel had been hard at work here for endless hours. For days and weeks he had studied feverishly the abstruse calculations contained in those sheets of foolscap before him; for weeks had he compared every detail of his plans, and again for weeks had he watched and kept record of the motions of his machines. Yet, after all these weeks of constant and careful work, and while yet the machinery seemed to be moving smoothly and rhythmically—to the uninformed outsider apparently fulfilling all its functions—why, then, did Marcel sit shivering and huddled up in front of a dying fire, with that look of blank despair on his thin, sallow face?

It is hard to have success within one's reach, to see the possibilities of wealth and distinction all ready for grasping before one's view, to think that here at last is the final fulfilment of all one's hopes and aspirations, and then suddenly and unexpectedly to meet with a reverse, such a *bouleversement* as the disappearance of Ivan had proved to Marcel Fleur.

"The French Government insists," he muttered. "It is either disgrace or——" he paused and shivered.

We remember how successful had been the flight from Melun to London, and how Marcel had, in that experience, demonstrated to a wondering world the capacity of his remarkable invention. That excursion had stimulated the British intelligence to an extent unknown since the Boer war, and had been the occasion of such inquietude in Germany that it was even suggested in the highest quarters that a *casus belli* should at once be determined with France, lest a worst thing for Germany should happen!

But why should Marcel not be able to fall in with the requirements of the French Government?

He had made a successful flight. He had demonstrated that his machine could overcome all the difficulties which navigators might contemplate. The machine had been shown to be superior to changes of wind directions, and alteration of temperatures; in fact, the wonderful automatic controlling mechanism which Ivan had devised had ensured safety under all the varying conditions of the inconstant air.

But Ivan had been spirited away. Ivan, with his wonderful brain, was no longer there to make the necessary suggestions when the mechanism failed. He was gone, and the plans of the airship were gone also. Not a trace of them had been discovered.

And Marcel sat by the fire alone, gazing with wild, tired eyes into what lay before him.

"After all, a man can but die once!" he murmured. "Anyway, I shall face the supreme test. I shall do my best."

A wave of bitterness flowed over him. He cursed the fates roundly that had endowed him with all his brilliant gifts, yet had denied him the final something which would have enabled him to complete all his plans. How cruel it was that he, who was in reality so brilliant a being, should be frustrated by some irony of destiny!

Next day at noon, all Paris was out watching. Marcel Fleur! The name was on every one's lips, and crowds of spectators were making a day of it, in order to follow his demonstration.

The machine was brought out along the rail, gradually rising as it got towards the end thereof. The flight was at first smooth and regularly upward. Marcel circled round above the heads of the people about 150 feet.

The vast crowds, watching and admiring, broke into excited cheering.

After a long circuit it was noticed that the machine was rapidly rising with a remarkable velocity. The crowds cheered still more loudly.

But those who were watching through their glasses observed Marcel's quick movements, and realised that he seemed to be in difficulties.

The upward velocity increased at an alarming rate, so that in a few minutes the machine simply appeared like a small bird to the unaided eye, at such a rate had it flown skywards in the wild celerity of its course.

"Vive Marcel Fleur!" shouted the crowd.

Suddenly the intense and breathless silence of suspense that held, as though in chains of iron, the enormous crowd of watching Parisians, was broken by a sudden cry from those more fortunate people who were following the flight of the machine through their opera glasses.

"*Mon Dieu! Qu'est-ce que c'est?* What is this?"

With every nerve of brain and body strained to the very uttermost, they watched, these Parisians, the doings of their idol.

And not Parisians only were they, these vast surging masses of onlookers who had come hither to-day to see the supreme manifestation of what the greatest aeronaut of the day had achieved in the little-known field of aviation—but Germans, Russians, Austrians, Englishmen, of the highest birth and most distinguished calibre, were following the course of that little bird-like speck with an intensity that defies all words—so acute and deep-reaching was it. It seemed as though the whole world was aroused. The Continental nations had lost sight of their boundaries. In the cause of science all these European countries had become as one, just as in a great football match, or—may we say it?—in a dog fight, as the author of "Rab and his Friends" has said it for us, when every man loses sight of his identity in the supreme excitement of the fight and the unknown issue.

Breathlessly the multitude gazed upwards.

Down, down, down, that little black speck was now dashing. Every heart-beat seemed to increase its incredible rapidity of movement. What was happening? Was it possible something was going wrong? Down, down, down, it came rushing—that little bird-like speck, and as it came nearer and nearer the watching crowd it became larger and blacker, only that there was not time to note anything of this.

As it came towards the ground the crowds yelled and shrieked with terror, and dashed wildly aside in all directions, fearing the horror of death and demolition that the fall of the airship in their midst would cause inevitably. All in a moment, it seemed—in an incredible second—it had reached the earth, and the weight and shock of the collision had shattered it far and wide into a thousand atoms. Luckily, it fell into a clear space. No one was injured. The one and only fatality, or accident even, was the frightful death that had befallen Marcel Fleur himself.

It seemed as if nothing was left of the wonderful, soaring creature that had taken possession of the air

and the sky in so imperial a fashion, guided by the hand of a man who had mastered the secrets of the air and devoted his life to experimenting and demonstrating his knowledge to the glory of France.

It was all over.

Several moments of awe-stricken silence reigned over the watching, listening crowd. Every one stood as though paralysed. No one moved or spoke. A terrible emotion chained every man and woman and child in that great crowd, and kept them motionless and speechless.

"*Mon Dieu!*" breathed the Parisians.

What was it exactly that had caused disaster? Where had Marcel Fleur encountered that haunting, fateful point which his sharpened senses had prognosticated to him so vividly before the demonstration? What had gone wrong up there, alone, in the high empyrean? No one could do more than suggest, for definite knowledge must be for ever impossible. Probably the forces imprisoned in the radio-motor, kept under control by Ivan's invention, had burst away from beyond Marcel's command, and had resulted in a complete disintegration of the component parts of the machinery.

The gas envelope had burst as a result of the explosion, and the remainder of the mutilated machine had been hurled headlong into destruction, with the ill-fated aeronaut in its grasp.

Then some officials recovered their senses, and hurried towards the spot where the airship had descended.

The air was broken with sounds of women weeping and of men's ejaculations, breathed out fiercely and hotly from the very depths of their hearts.

All that remained of the world-famous aeronaut was a shapeless and unrecognisable mass.

"Marcel Fleur! Oh! Marcel Fleur," wept the crowds when they understood what had happened.

A wave of poignant, indescribable bitterness flowed

like the sea over the hearts of these adoring, idolising people.

There was no limit to their grief, and they threw themselves on the earth and allowed their fellow-beings to trample on them in the agony of their emotion, for it seemed to them that Marcel was a martyr who had died for a great cause. A hero was he, whose lustre the years would never dim, come what might, whose courage and brilliancy could never, never be wiped off the calendars of the French nation, whose name would never be forgotten, but must be handed down to generations of the children of the future, with the proud words, "Marcel Fleur died in the cause of the greatest discovery the world has ever known."

And so Marcel came by his laurel wreath, and *Le Jour* was left to make the very best it could of the matter.

Why need we disguise the fact? Paltry and trivial though it may seem, *Le Jour* was very angry. The prize had been snatched, as it were, from its fingers. It had anticipated the utter confusion and exposure of Marcel Fleur, and had been all prepared to come out with its startling story of why the aeronaut was unable to give a satisfactory demonstration of his powers and his machine. Instead, he was dead! And in one moment his name was carved on a niche from which the bravest man would not dare to oust him.

In the end he had succeeded beyond any dream of his own.

CHAPTER XLII

AFTER leaving the Countess de Rigos, Theodora drove to the prison with William East. The parting with him inside the gates of the prison had no significance whatever to her, for the only thought in her mind at that moment was that she was about to see George; and she was utterly blind to the feelings of this big, strong man beside her, who had so wonderfully played the part of a kind and protecting brother to her ever since the first moment they had met at Pietra Santa. Never by word or look had he allowed himself to reveal a suspicion of his great love for her.

"Shall I wait for you?" he said.

"Oh, you're *so* good to me!" cried Theodora. "It doesn't seem to me as if I ought to allow you to waste so much of your time over me as you have been doing ever since the moment I first saw you. It seems so horrid of me to let you."

"Please let me," he said simply, holding her soft little white hand in his, since she left it there so confidingly. "It is a pleasure to me, as you know, to do anything for you."

"So you always say," she replied, with a little spark of gaiety. "Then, if you'll be so good, you may wait for me, and I shall look forward to seeing you again when my interview with my husband is over. It will not be long," she added sadly, and she left him, standing there in the courtyard, while the custodians conducted her away to the right, into the room where she was to meet Sir George Allingham.

"Now she is gone!" said East, and his face grew

drawn. "She has gone to him, and that is the only thought in her mind."

He paced up and down, smoking his cigarette, until the porter asked him would he not sit down a while in the waiting-room, where the fire was burning.

"Here's the latest evening journal, monsieur," added the man.

He opened the still damp sheets of the little evening newspaper.

Great black, blinding letters had been employed to give further importance and publicity to the one event of the day that Paris could think of.

"The Airship's Demonstration! Terrible Catastrophe! Dashed to Pieces Before the Eyes of all Paris! Marcel Fleur's Glorious Death in the Cause of Science!"

These words leapt before him as he read.

In the meantime, Theodora had crossed the courtyard and been conducted by two silent turnkeys into a dark little room on the right, whose one long door was entirely of glass. She passed in, and the glass door swung behind her, but the turnkey who had escorted her remained at the door, where he could look in and see all that happened. The room was absolutely bare, except for one long deal table and three common chairs. Through the dimness of the late afternoon light, that was all yellowy and blurred in the absence of the sun and the overhanging rain-clouds that were already beginning to break dolorously over Paris, she saw before her a man rising from a chair at the far end of the long deal table. . . . He came towards her . . . nearer and nearer . . . until at last they were looking into each other's eyes.

"Why have you come here?" The words fell dully and lifelessly from his lips. There was no light in his eyes as he looked at her.

"George!"

Like a flame of fire his name burst from her, and

whatever she had meant to do or say was swept away into oblivion as she looked into his face again "after long grief and pain."

"Why have you come?" he asked dully.

"Oh, George—George!"

She had rushed towards him and thrown herself into his arms, and her face was there just under his, and there was nothing for him to do but to hold her.

"You should not have come," he repeated.

For several moments she was quite incapable of speech. The turnkey, looking in through the glass door, turned away his head. The Englishman's face was ghastly, and the beautiful wife was weeping in his arms. These scenes were common to the prison, and yet they never lost their frightful human pathos, for he was a Frenchman—the turnkey—and the love of a man and a woman was something that he never could look upon wholly unmovedly, in spite of the many harrowing scenes he had been witness of. It was always the same. The wife always wept passionate tears. The man who was guilty always looked white and set as if he were tasting his bitterest moment when he realised that a woman's love for him had kept alive through thick and thin, and was burning fiercely, although he was here in prison, charged with some crime of which, in nine cases out of ten, he was all too guilty. But not often had as lovely a woman as this been admitted to an interview with a prisoner here, and the turnkey sighed, and hoped from the very bottom of his heart that things would turn out all right in the end for this good-looking, distinguished couple.

"I'll not be hard on them," he muttered; "if they go over the time a little I won't say anything."

"You should not have come," George repeated.

"Oh! yes—yes . . . the terrible part of it is that I never came before." She drew herself away from him, now realising bitterly that there was a coldness and aloofness in his manner of holding her. Yes,

even now, in the supreme moment, when she had come to him in his prison to try to save him, he was making her feel that his heart was cold towards her.

"I knew nothing about it until two days ago," she told him, her voice coming in little broken breaths, and her white hand pressed against her heart as she tried to overcome the violent trembling that ran through her slight, fragile frame. "I was far away, and I heard nothing. I saw no newspapers—I had no news, because I had placed myself for several days in a position where no news could reach me, even from my darling mother, and then when she might have written to me she was taken ill with pneumonia, and has been hanging between life and death ever since."

"I am grieved to hear that," said George, quietly. "My friend the Duke d'Ailes informed me of her serious illness. I trust the worst is over now."

"I have seen her to-day for a few moments," said Theodora, sadly. "She's very ill; but the crisis has passed, and the doctors say she may recover, with the greatest care."

Now her little white hands were clasping and unclasping themselves in the old nervous way that he knew so well.

"I have so much to say to you," she stammered, "that I scarcely know where to begin, but as we're speaking of my mother"—she paused—"there is something very painful"—she paused again——

"Then do not speak of it," said George, gravely.

"Ah! But it was my silence about it that wrought terrible mischief between you and me."

George started. "What do you mean?" he said. "What painful thing connected with your mother has ever been the cause of mischief between you and me?"

As he spoke, there flashed across him a vivid recollection of that night when Theodora and the Princess had gone off to the hospital to see the

dying Pole, Krikoffsky. Krikoffsky had died before they saw him. Then, when they came back, how angered he had been at the way Theodora had treated him, refusing to open her lips on the subject, although, as he told her, she and her mother had risen from his dinner table to go to the hospital and see this man. He had—quite unsuspecting that he was doing an unpleasant thing—questioned her on her return, asking her for news of the poor man she had rushed away to see, and she had refused him all information. She had acted in a most extraordinary way. She had turned the subject ostentatiously. And then his anger had leaped forth. After all, he was only a man! It was but natural that he should expect his wife to treat him as a friend, and not as an utter stranger, as she had treated him that night. She had risen and swept out of the room, rather than vouchsafe one little word of information to him. Yes, here in the sombre silence of the prison it came back to him, as it had come back many a time since they had parted.

"I could not tell you before," Theodora was saying. . . . "It was not my affair . . . it was too terrible. But to-day she, my beloved mamma, she has told me to tell you all, and I am going to do so." Her voice broke with emotion.

"Why tell me?" cried George, sharply. "Why torture yourself? I assure you there is no need. That sort of thing is all over and done with. The time for confidences is over!"

"No; it has not yet begun."

Some wave of courage flowed over her just then, and stilled her trembling nerves. She looked up into his eyes, and began to speak in the low, clear voice, telling her story quickly, because there was so much more to tell afterwards.

"I grieved you that night by my silence. You were angry with me because I refused to confide in you. I deepened the cloud of suspicion and mistrust——"

She paused and faltered, and then went on sadly, "and dislike that had taken possession of your heart. And yet what could I do? It was a matter concerning the honour of the dearest one on earth." (Was it her fancy, or did George wince at that phrase on her lips?) "My mother," she continued hastily. "It is something very sad—and very dreadful." She braced herself, and told him with no further hesitation of that dark shadow which had lain over the Princess's life. "The man who died that night—that man Krikoffsky, the singer—he was my father."

George started, and looked at her as if unable to realise what she was saying.

"My mother had married him, believing her husband was dead and that she was a widow. And I was their child, and a few weeks after my birth my mother's English husband reappeared. There was a scene—a duel, and he left Krikoffsky as if dead, and forced my mother to flee with him out of the country."

"I see why you could not tell me," said Sir George, in a low voice, breaking the silence after a moment. "But if you thought it would have mattered to me, you were wrong. You might have trusted me."

A vast silence seemed to have settled down upon them and chained them in its grasp. They stood there before each other, unable to speak, these two who had so much to tell each other. The turnkey walked up and down outside, observing that they were not speaking, and thinking it a pity they did not make better use of their time than stand there staring dumbly and stupidly about them—these two distinguished, handsome people, in whom he took more than an ordinary interest, somehow.

"Was that what you came to tell me to-day?" George asked, at last.

His eyes had been hungrily but surreptitiously drinking in the sight of her fairness again, and it seemed to him she was lovelier than ever, though she

was strangely changed by the way she was doing her hair.

"No," she replied, awkwardly battling with words that would not come. "I came, of course, chiefly because of—because of the——" (she wanted to say the word "theft," but it was impossible to utter it) "because of the dressing-bag and the plans. I have news of them. I have discovered the culprit, and in a few hours the police will be acquainted with the news, and your freedom can now only be a question of a very short time. The thief was a woman."

He stared dumbly at her still, and in that moment it came to him with clear and convincing certainty that she was not, and never could have been, guilty, and that he must have been insane to imagine such a thing.

"And I—and oh! George, how is it possible that you could have believed that I was the woman? Never as long as I live shall I be able to understand how you could have thought that of me! You must have hated, and loathed, and despised me, before your brain or your heart could have allowed you to think anything so monstrous about me. It was cruel—it was wicked . . . and all the time the guilty one was some one you knew—and loved, perhaps."

"Tell me her name," he breathed, light breaking in upon him almost before she replied.

"It was the Countess de Rigos! She has made a full confession, before me and a witness; she stole the plans and entered my rooms in disguise, and put the plans in my bag to revenge herself on you because you had thrown her over and refused to marry her after you met me."

Then the turnkey, who was looking in at that moment, as it happened, saw an extraordinary sight.

The glum, sad Englishman suddenly burst into loud and spontaneous laughter, the first that had issued from his lips for many a long day.

"I threw over the Countess de Rigos! I refused

to marry her! Why, this is indeed a comedy! So that is her story—the brave liar—that's the way she's putting it now! Really, it is too funny, and you must forgive me if I laugh. One has not very often the opportunities for amusement within these walls, and I take advantage now of the droll thing you have just told me. So she stole the plans and put them in the dressing-bag, did she?"

He said the words, but his mind somehow refused to realise in the least what he was saying.

That terrible clouding of the faculties that comes over the keenest intelligence after many days of the drab and endless monotony of prison life had deadened him. He seemed half-awake only. It was all a dream, he thought, that Theodora was standing there before him, telling him that "Mrs. Packinthorp" was a thief, and had confessed, and that he would be free in a few hours. It was too unreal and vague to be grasped, and he stared at her stupidly, simply waiting to know what she would say and do next.

Little did he guess how terribly his dulness and silence affected her, and how she was reading into it, heart-brokenly, his coldness and distrust and dislike of her, even now at this moment when she had brought him the wonderful news of the confession that she had wrested from the Countess de Rigos's guilty lips. And yet his laughter at the Countess's story that he had loved her filled her with a strange secret joy.

"Theodora!"

He spoke her name as if the sound of it might help him to dispel the mist in his brain.

"What is it?"

How she longed for him to say one little word of tenderness to her; she was weak and exhausted, and was almost at the point of fainting, and yet she remained there standing before him, looking at him, and craving with all her heart and soul for the sign of his love that he so pitilessly withheld from her.

"What of Marcel Fleur?" he said.

"Marcel Fleur! I have heard nothing of him," she answered. . . . "Ah! I remember what you're thinking of. . . . You've gone back to that old point of difference between us."

"Yes. Heaven forgive me, I have," he answered. "There's that secret between you still. . . ."

Neither of them just then was in the least like a normal human being, but who could ask a man who had lain in prison for weeks for a crime which he had never committed to be a normal and ordinary human being at a moment's notice? And as for Theodora, her mind and her frame were almost at the last gasp of endurance after those terrible journeys across Europe, and after all the agony and suspense she had been going through. The wits of both were beclouded. They were like people in a trance. Fain would they have awakened themselves, but neither knew how to, and yet one thing was clear to Theodora's mind.

She would not betray Marcel's secret.

"Are you going to tell me the truth about it now?" George asked.

"Heaven help me, George, but I cannot. Don't ask me. The same motive that kept me silent then must keep me silent now."

The turnkey had opened the door and entered.

"Monsieur," he said, "the gentleman who accompanied madame sends you this paper, and bids you read here," he pointed with his finger, "the death of Marcel Fleur, the aeronaut—the journal tells all about it." He put the paper in George's hand. "There is only one moment left, monsieur," he said respectfully, "then madame's time is up."

Like a wild thing Theodora snatched the paper from George's hand and devoured the black, staring headlines which set forth the news of Marcel's demonstration and its shocking ending.

"He is dead," she cried, "dead! dead! . . . He is no longer in the world to be harmed by my telling.

. . . Oh! George—George, I am free at last to tell you the secret that I have always refused to betray to you hitherto. . . . Listen!"

"No! No! Don't tell me," cried George.

Before she could speak he had seized her in his arms. And the turnkey was satisfied now; for the English milord was holding the beautiful lady close, and kissing her as though he never meant to let her go again.

CHAPTER XLIII

CLASPED in George's arms again, held close to his heart once more, it seemed to Theodora as if some incredible change came over the sad, old world, that is made up of such devious mixtures of gall and honey—of bitter and sweet—of blackest midnight shadows and ever-succeeding sunrises; it seemed to her as if she had been dead and buried for centuries, and was now restored to life by some supernatural power that had brought her back in one miraculous moment to the full tide of life and joy.

The magic of the moment was all contained in the clasp of George's arms.

Only a few words fell from his lips, for he, too, was tasting one of those immortal moments when the pain and suffering of life become as unreal and meaningless as chaff in the wind before the great current of love; he, too, was in Heaven; to him the old prison walls had vanished, the turnkey, who was waiting so patiently and humanely outside the glass door, had no longer any existence, the gloom of rapidly descending night was like some lovely sunrise breaking over a fairy-like tropic isle in the southern seas. Prison! Paris! Disgrace and shame! Sleeplessness and long hours of anguish and despair! All in a moment these things had lost every semblance of reality. They were not real—not one of them—they were simply hallucinations of his brain! He had dreamt them in nightmares! Nothing on earth was real but the woman he held in his arms.

"What fools we've been, dearest!" he muttered, holding her closer.

"I have been the one to blame always."

"Such fools. . . . This moment teaches it to us: our wanton monstrous folly. . . . Oh! my love," he went on brokenly, "now that I have you in my arms again it seems to me as if I must have been stark, staring mad ever to have let you go even for a moment! . . . Was I a lunatic, indeed, that I could ever have doubted you or looked coldly upon you, or turned away from you, and hardened my heart against you, and believed cruel and maddening things about you? . . . How could I have done so? . . . How could I ever have dreamt that anything mattered beside the fact that you were my beloved? . . . What on earth was wrong with me that I could act so outrageously?"

He put his hand under her chin and raised her face to his and looked long into her eyes.

"Dearest," he said, "how are we to explain it?"

Over the whiteness of Theodora's face there went flitting an exquisite little smile, full of sweetness and joy.

"I can explain it, George," she said. "It is not as hard as you think."

"Tell me," whispered George.

"One word explains it all," she replied softly, winding her arms round his neck as she spoke, and laying her cheek to his. And she whispered in his ear, "It was love."

There was silence for a few moments, and then George said—

"Was that it?"

And it seemed to him that her way of explaining all the trouble that had arisen between them was the most beautiful thing that he had ever heard. It was so true, too. Man-like, he was amazed at the feminine quickness that had cut through all the mystery and

complication in one moment and wiped everything out by the utterance of that explanation.

"And this moment proves it," said Theodora. "The way everything we have been agonising ourselves about has come in one second not to matter a little bit shows that what I say is right."

"Dearest, you love me then?" . . .

He was strangely moved by her words and the courage with which she flung aside all the darkness and difficulties of their past and their future, all the overhanging cloud and scandal and public contumely and criticism that lay before them. He saw that she had forgotten all that. And he was glad. He realised that she had risen to one of the highest moments of a woman's existence when she so sweetly turned all their troubles aside with the utterance of that magic word, love.

"You really love me? . . . This isn't a dream, is it? . . . It's you—my Theodora, whose arms are round my neck, and whose warm breath is in my ear? . . . And you care for me with all your heart and soul, in spite of the awful wrong I have done you?"

For answer her arms clung closer round his neck.

"The awful wrong you've done me," she echoed. "What was it? I never heard of that, George. There was never any such wrong."

"When I believed—in my incredible lunacy—that you—that you had gone off with Marcel's plans."

She smiled up into his eyes as he spoke.

"How could you help it?" she said. "My disappearance and those scraps of my letters to poor Marcel were too great coincidences . . . and though you did believe that I had taken them, you far more than atoned for your suspicion of me by pretending that you were the guilty one and going to prison for my sake."

They clung to each other in silence, as the recollection of all they had suffered swept over them again. But it could not part them—that recollection. On

the contrary, it had been transformed into some magic wand, whose mission was to drive them closer and closer.

The turnkey had been very patient; but now ten whole minutes over time had passed, and the governor would soon be coming round, and he realised that he must no longer be a man, with a human heart that was beating a little gladly because these two beautiful beings were clasped in each other's arms; he must be a turnkey, and announce to them in a stern, official voice: "Monsieur, your time is up!"

And the secret of Marcel had been utterly forgotten by both of them!

L'Envoi

Far away in the monastery on a cypress-covered hill, looking down on endless olive slopes across the blue waters of the Mediterranean, is a dark-haired, southern-looking ascetic, who is known by the name of Brother Ignace. For him life was over, once and for all, when he discovered the falseness of his lovely wife. Nothing was left to him but prayer and solitude, in the hope of atoning for the violent deeds which had marked his life out in the world. He is beloved by all; he has brought hither a great fortune, and now he spends his days and nights in doing good. And he clings to the thought of the Countess de Rigos's confession in his darkest moments.

"At the end she was true," he said, poor, poor Ignace!

To-day, the most honoured name in France is that of Ivan Ivolott, the great inventor of airships. To Paris it was like magic, the way he came and filled the terrible blank caused by Marcel Fleur's loss. His brilliant successes are the talk of Europe; but he is still the gentle old Ivan, and he weeps when he thinks of Marcel's death.

And George and Theodora! Is it necessary to say that all the happiness of utter trust and love is theirs? Little children play merrily in their beautiful home now; and William East is almost always to be found there, the dear friend of the master and mistress of the house, and of the Princess.

He is treated exactly like a brother. His old mother has passed away, and George's house is his real home now . . . and dear Carolina sums him up in her own adorable little phrase,—"Very reech, very 'ansome, very facksinating," and sighs, who knows why?

And so let us ring down the curtain upon George and Theodora. The drama is ended. The lights are out.

THE END

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